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ASHLEY C. FORD

A writer well acquainted with society's construction of body image, Ford met with I Weigh founder Jameela Jamil for this issue's Playboy Interview. "Jameela has certainly amplified the conversation about who gets to influence what we view as 'beautiful' or 'normal' bodies and how they directly benefit from the insecurities they encourage," says the Brooklyn-based writer. Named one of Forbes magazine's 30 Under 30 in Media in 2017, she's currently working on a memoir, Somebody's Daughter.

NADINE STROSSEN

In Words Matter, the New York Law School professor emerita and former ACLU president emphasizes the correlation between speech and progress. Strossen, who penned the 2018 book Hate: Why We Should Resist It With Free Speech, Not Censorship, argues, "The only effective way to encourage political correctness is through more speech. Civil discourse requires respectfully listening to ideas, as well as respectfully responding."

SASHA SAMSONOVA

The Ukrainian photographer, known for her portrait work, has lent Playboy her talents several times in the past year, shooting porn star turned whistle-blower Stormy Daniels, as well as makeup mogul Kylie Jenner and her then beau, Travis Scott. For The Empath, Samsonova turned her lens on Alicia Loraina Olivas, our tenacious June Playmate. "Alicia's confidence and fearlessness just poured out of her," says Samsonova. "She stood in ice-cold water and was like, 'I feel great!' She radiated so much energy — nothing inspires me more."

ALICIA GARZA

"Democracy is not a spectator sport. I hope the Symposium motivates readers to get involved," says the #BlackLivesMatter co-founder and guest editor of the latest Playboy Symposium. The seasoned community organizer recently founded Black Futures Lab and co-founded Supermajority to empower black communities and women in politics respectively. She also serves as the strategy and partnerships director for the National Domestic Workers Alliance and is a frequent contributor to Marie Claire.

GEORGE MCCALMAN

The vignettes bringing to life the voices in The Playboy Symposium are creations of this San Francisco–based artist. "The five figures are all fighters," says McCalman. "They believe humanity can be better than it is. I tried to capture that essence in my illustrations." His work can also be found in the San Francisco Chronicle columns Observed and The Usual, and in his debut collection,Illustrated Black History, out in August.

MATT LASLO

What makes Cory Gardner of Colorado a unique figure in national politics? playboy called on veteran Washington reporter Laslo to find out. In Senator Gardner, Radical Centrist, he discovers that despite sharing a ballot with Republicans, Gardner often holds positions that diverge from his party's. Of note: his support for cannabis legalization. "I was most surprised to learn Gardner — a champion of his state's legal cannabis industry — has never even tried weed," reports Laslo.

LONNIE MILLSAP

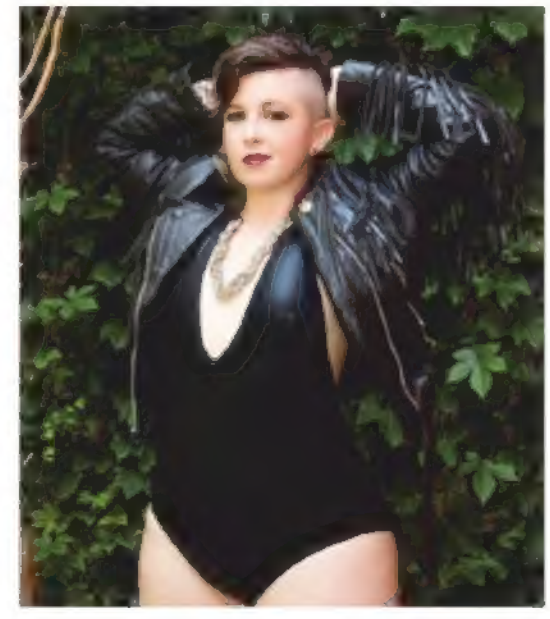
The Reuben Award–nominated cartoonist and New Yorker contributor has a significant professional relationship with our Speech Issue's theme. "As a cartoonist, freedom of speech is important because it gives you the ability to expand on any idea that comes to mind without having to answer to anybody," he says. Millsap's cartoons can be found in his annual art books, the latest of which is My Nib Is Cold!, and on page 61.

KILEY REID

"I was thrilled to make playboy a home for this short story, since it's one I've spent longer on than any other short piece," says the Iowa Writers' Workshop graduate and Truman Capote Fellow of her inaugural Playboy fiction piece, Your First Pet and the Street You Grew Up On. In 2019 the Philadelphiabased writer released her debut novel, Such a Fun Age, landing herself a spot on the New York Times best-sellers list.

TINA HORN

For SFSX: The Dirty Mind Guide 2 Talking Dirty, Horn collaborated with illustrator Alejandra Gutiérrez to bring her comic series to life for playboy. "Alejandra helped me dial down the serious nature of my sci-fi comics and accentuate the playful fizziness, sight gags and absurd horniness instead." In addition to working in comics, Horn is a nonfiction writer, Rolling Stone reporter, podcast producer and host (Why Are People Into That?!) and sex-work educator.



KRISTI BECK

Our senior manager of partner strategy is no stranger to Playboy magazine: Beck has been helping select Playmates for more than a year. "I'm passionate about female self-image and have worked to increase inclusivity in the Playboy brand. It's exciting to help a meaningful franchise evolve." For this issue, Beck expanded her role, recruiting I Weigh's Jameela Jamil, a fellow champion of inclusivity, to serve as guest editor.

RICHIE TALBOY

"I was hoping to rewrite history while capturing the iconic hypermasculinity of men's fragrance campaigns from the 1980s and 1990s," says the photographer of his shoot for The Future Is Dorian Electra. "Dorian was perfect for that, because they have a natural campiness that's ideal for creating imagery." Talboy portrays all his subjects—his clients include the high-fashion brand Prada as well as such high-profile celebrities as Kim Kardashian — with a distinct air of eccentricity.

OSMAN CAN YEREBAKAN

New York magazine and Artforum are just two of the publications Yerebakan contributes to in addition to playboy. For this issue, the writer traveled to Chicago to meet Nick Cave, subject of our artist feature Body & Soul. "Meeting Nick at Facility, where he lives and works, was a unique experience," says Yerebakan. "It gave me the opportunity to witness his everyday life. It's those intimate moments that illustrate Cave's prolific nature as a thinker, maker and human."

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Photography by Adam Tree
No 29 | **May 2020**

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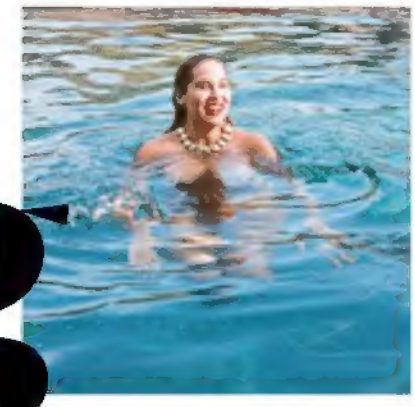
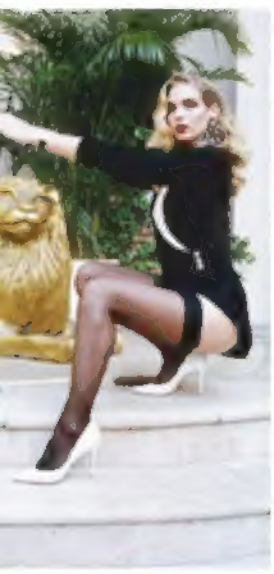


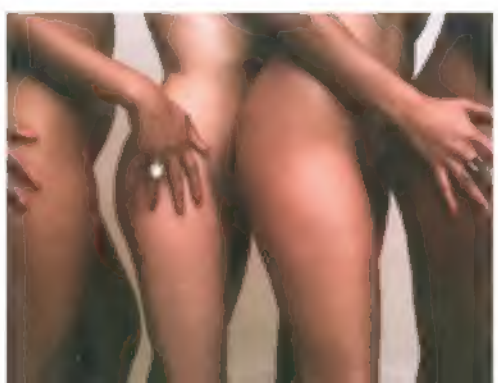
the dazzling dozen

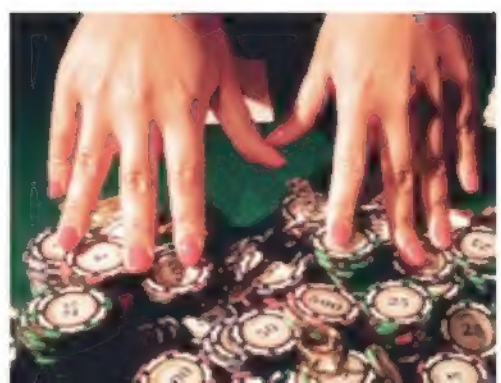
They say you shouldn't play favorites, so we didn't: This year all 12 of our 2019 Playmates of the Month will be honored as Playmates of the Year.

"Without evolution, nothing will ever succeed. It felt right to start the decade with a big change," says Kristi Beck, Playboy's senior manager of partner strategy who helped make the decision to honor all the women instead of just one. "I'm indebted to all of our powerhouse, unique 2019 Playmates, and I'm excited to see all 12 represented as our Playmates of the Year in 2020."

Honoring collaboration over competition, all our Playmates from last year — along with 2019 PMOY Jordan Emanuel, who helped celebrate the changing of the guard — converged on a Los Angeles mansion in January for a shoot of historic proportions. The set buzzed with energy as photographers Ali Mitton and Chloe Chippendale, in collaboration with stylist Kelley Ash, captured the 12 PMOYs together (outtakes presented on this page). See the results — a veritable sisterhood of sizzle — on page 100.







Boss Lady

When we heard Jameela Jamil (left), outspoken star of NBC's The Good Place and founder of the advocacy brand I Weigh, was interested in sitting for the *Playboy Interview*, we decided to take things a step further. Because Jamil's goal of a more inclusive world aligns with our own, we asked the entrepreneurial Brit to name some talent she felt deserved more attention. Topping the list was actresscomedian Quinta Brunson, author of this issue's defiant humor essay, Average Acceptance Now. No stranger to overachievement, Jamil was also pivotal in inviting April Playmate Marsha Elle into the Playboy family.

APlus Plus

Holly Ruprecht, our associate director of subscriptions for Playboy Plus, had quite a January. First she presided over a panel on brand partnerships alongside Plus models Elsa Jean and Ana Foxxx at the XBIZ trade show in West Hollywood (right), where Playboy Plus won the XBIZ award for nude photography site of the year. The following week Ruprecht booked it to Vegas for the AVN adult expo, where she repped the brand and sold limitededition T-shirts featuring Plus models — and where Playboy Plus collected a GFY nomination for best erotic/soft site.

Giddy Up

Farewell, Old Friend

For more than 50 years Gahan Wilson (right) kept PLAYBOY readers entertained with his offbeat and irreverent cartoons, which typically plumbed the dark and dusty corners of human circumstance, generally to hilarious end. In November he passed away at the age of 89. Good-bye, Gahan, and thanks for all the laughs.

Getting Jazzy in June

The Playboy Jazz Festival kicks off June 6 at the Hollywood Bowl for its 42nd year. Longtime host George Lopez will emcee the slammin' two-day slate of performances from musicians including the Isley Brothers (right), Musiq Soulchild (left), Femi Kuti and the Positive Force, Anat Cohen, Allison Miller and more. Get your tickets now at HollywoodBowl.com.

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ILLUSTRATION BY **BLAKE KATHRYN**

The True Threat

8chan founder and former "king of the trolls" Fredrick Brennan is fighting a multifront war over how—and whether—to counter hate speech; here, a report from the front lines

BY **DONOVAN FARLEY**

At the outset of an interview held on Christmas Eve of this past year, Fredrick Brennan expresses some relief that our Skype session is audio only: It allows him to relax a bit more.

Throughout this conversation and over two months of further Skype calls and Twitter DMs, the 8chan founder is erudite, outgoing and quick to laugh. This is hard to square with his former reputation as king of the trolls — a free-speech absolutist and overlord of the anonymous and unmoderated chat forum known these days as a global gathering place for white male extremists, an incubator of QAnon and a repository of manifestos written by mass shooters.

Now in his mid-20s and based in the Philippines, Brennan is weary of discussing the many ways his creation slipped out of his control, but he seems to feel duty-bound to do so. He left the site in 2018, having launched it five years earlier, and last year began to speak out on Twitter and in the press. He claims that 8chan, now rebranded as 8kun, is such a danger that it should be permanently deplatformed, an idea repellent both to 8chan devotees and to, well, every other source who went on record for this story, from a developer to a senator to the site's current owners.

Beyond his obvious intelligence, Brennan has an almost childlike quality that has a lot to do with his newfound enthusiasm for the real world, where events such as his recent marriage have helped draw him from the darkness. He displays little of the awkwardness that often defines your typical tech genius. But he wasn't always like this.

At the age of 14, already dealing with painful isolation as a result of a congenital condition (he was born with osteogenesis imperfecta, or brittle bone disease, which stunted his growth and keeps him in a wheelchair), Brennan, along with his similarly disabled brother, was placed in New York's foster care system. The internet became his sanctuary.

"When the internet first came into my house, it was very different to be able to communicate that way, but it also became a replacement for real life," he says. "And when you're a kid, you don't know it's less than."

Brennan insists he didn't intend to create a platform for mass murderers. Just as Facebook began as a site where Harvard students could rate one another's attractiveness and evolved into a cultural behemoth with the power to affect presidential elections, 8chan grew, albeit on a much smaller scale, into something its creator never imagined.

"Platforms over time develop a personality. 8chan on its first day was never going to get an El Paso shooter posting on it," he says, referring to the 2019 massacre in a Texas Walmart that left 22 innocent people dead. Adding that incident to the shootings in Christchurch, New Zealand, and Poway, California, 74 people were killed last year by men who'd posted their manifestos on 8chan.

"The platform and the community there developed to allow that kind of behavior," Brennan says, "and that's something that takes years to happen."

His use of the word personality raises questions: What other human traits might 8chan possess? Does its ability to change offer hope that its condition isn't terminal?

• • •

8chan is hardly the first image-and-discussion board of its type: It followed 4chan, which was launched in the mid-2000s by current Google employee Christopher Poole. (The idea for 4chan came, in turn, from Poole's experience on the Japanese site 2chan.) Poole's stated ethos for the platform was "a simple image-based bulletin board where anyone can post comments and share images."

The freewheeling camaraderie offered on 4chan and its ilk was welcome in the face of growing internet regulations. 4chan first sprang into the national consciousness when the hacking collective Anonymous began using the board to discuss plans for hacks and pranks. It also bred legendary memes such as Rickrolling, lolcats and Pepe the Frog — the heavy-lidded cartoon amphibian that mutated, without its creator's consent, into a hard-right mascot. Racists, homophobes, pedophiles and misogynists, drawn by the site's lax moderation, used their shared beliefs to harass and troll those who opposed them, both online and off.

When the Gamergate controversy — a loose campaign of doxxing and threats leveled at female video game developers and writers — erupted in 2014, Poole banned all discussion of the matter. This prompted outrage among the site's heaviest users, which in turn prompted a migration to 8chan, at that time a little-known offshoot. Soon the de facto home for white nationalists and neo-Nazis, Brennan's platform also became such a popular hub for child pornography that the site was briefly delisted from Google Search.

QAnon — a collection of baseless conspiracy theories revolving around Q, a supposed government insider who insists President Trump is fighting a secret battle against a cabal of Democratic elites who run a satanic child-sex ring — exists on the board because the poster's identity can be confirmed only via their 8chan ID. That is to say, no one knows Q's real-world identity for certain, but their 8chan handle at least suggests that one person is running the show. At press time there are dozens of Q-related Facebook groups all over the world, with the top few seeing nearly 2,000 posts a day. At least 19 current congressional candidates have voiced support for the conspiracy theory, which has allegedly resulted in several acts of violence and one murder.

Brennan hints at the inner shift that eventually compelled him to leave 8chan: "I was one of these libertarian idiots thinking, Oh, you know, my in-box is just ideologically diverse — even though it was mostly Nazis e-mailing me."

As the site's popularity intensified — according to Brennan, it mushroomed from around 100 posts a day to more than 4,000 an hour in 2014 — the founder became overwhelmed by the gargantuan task of keeping the board online: Bandwidth and contentflagging issues were constant. Suffering from severe burnout and strapped for funds, he agreed to a partnership with internet entrepreneur Jim Watkins in 2014, on the condition that Brennan would relocate from the U.S. to Watkins's base in the Philippines and be retained to help run the site.

Watkins, an Army veteran, pig farmer and self-described serial entrepreneur in his mid-50s, accumulated a great deal of his fortune via his first start-up, a porn website designed to circumvent 1990s Japanese censorship laws. The experience not only enriched Watkins (whose ubiquitous uniform of graphic T-shirt and shorts exudes something of a "Roger Stone on vacation" vibe), it instilled in him a disdain for censorship and a reputation for circumventing it.

Brennan sold the site to Jim Watkins in 2015, and Jim's son Ron emerged as the project's new champion. It was Ron who first told Jim about Brennan, and it's Ron who works on 8kun every day.

Initially the move was a blessing. The trio were kindred spirits who forged something of a bond under the site's motto: Embrace infamy. Brennan, however, began to tire of the daily moral degradation clogging his in-box. By December 2018 he'd had enough.

"The most important change in mind-set was that I came to believe Jim and Ron do not operate 8chan in good faith but rather to twisted ends," he says. "Their actions continue to betray them — for example, helping QAnon post and making sure QAnon's

identity would remain stable [during the transition from 8chan to 8kun], which they did for no one else." Ron Watkins, whose father is suing Brennan for libel over remarks he tweeted last year, addressed these claims via Twitter DM: "Fred is currently fighting a criminal libel case, so I can't recommend him as a good source of information." Pressed about possible connections to Q, Ron said, "Nobody from our team has had private contact with Q."

Last March, when a member of 8chan attacked two mosques in New Zealand, killing 51 and injuring 50 more, Brennan's relief at having left the site began to transmute into anger and shame. God help me if I started this, he thought. He vowed to make ending 8chan his new life aspiration. Little did he know the year's horrors had just begun.

• • •

Ron Watkins is unfailingly polite in all our Twitter DM chats but gets immediately down to business when I raise the subject of censorship. He skates around my questions concerning any guilt he may feel about what happens on the site. What is clear is that he adamantly believes in 8chan's mission of total autonomy for online speech.

"Corporations are taking control of most online spaces and removing speech while citing their increasingly restrictive terms and conditions of service," he says. "They frenziedly overreach with such impunity that the government does not even need to participate in censorship anymore."

Of course not everyone on 8chan/kun is a hateful degenerate, and Ron is quick to point out that those voices would bear the brunt of deplatforming as well. "Our entire platform with thousands of users is being actively silenced because companies that hold too much power over the infrastructure of the internet have decided that certain opinions shouldn't be allowed to be heard," he says. "We need to begin discussing an internet bill of rights that addresses content neutrality, data privacy and a host of other issues affecting the daily online lives of all Americans."

8chan vanished after multiple service providers cut ties in the wake of El Paso. At that time, Alexa's internet-traffic-ranking service listed 8chan in the top 5,000 sites worldwide — an impressive feat for a site that doesn't appear in Google searches. The gap between 8chan's disappearance and 8kun's birth three months later came at a heavy price for Jim and Ron Watkins: At press time Alexa ranked 8kun 45,094.

When Jim was called before Congress after the El Paso shooting (he wore a QAnon pin affixed to his collar), he made many of these points. Brennan tells me this appearance was a sham. The government, he says, lacks the internet literacy to comprehend what it's dealing with.

"What Congress gets wrong is they always call in the bad actor, the people who've done wrong," he says. "What they need to do is also bring in 4chan admins and ask, 'How do you guys do it? How did you clean up the site?' "

Judging by the views of a range of techies and legal experts, the site is not the unknown entity here.

• • •

The true-threat doctrine, established by the 1969 Supreme Court case *Watts v. United States*, attempts to lay the groundwork for courts to differentiate between potentially dangerous statements and those made in jest. But in a world where an innocuous cartoon frog and the "OK" hand signal can be appropriated by neofascists, how can one hope to identify and track potentially violent users?

"Defining hate speech is notoriously difficult, and therefore content monitoring at scale is extraordinarily challenging," says David Cole, national legal director of the American Civil Liberties Union, via e-mail. "The range of information, the volume of material and the nuances of context make the task virtually impossible."

There's no consensus on when internet speech enters the realm of the harmful and illegal, no line drawn in the sand à la falsely shouting "fire" in a crowded theater. Perhaps no line can be drawn on ground that shifts by the second.

Author, New York Times columnist and former Fusion TV news director Kevin Roose has written extensively about 8chan. "I'm not sure there should be a 'line' at all," he says. "These are private businesses that all have to make, and live with, their own choices about where to draw the line. Some platforms have amplified the voices of reprehensible people and allowed dangerous movements to hijack their services, and their executives will have to live with the repercussions of those choices for the rest of their lives."

But if the meteoric rise and apparent disregard for social responsibility shown by giants like Facebook have taught us anything, it's that tech titans can't be trusted to do what's right when it harms their bottom line. Longtime Democratic senator Ron Wyden of Oregon, who introduced the first Senate net-neutrality bill in 2006, tells me the answer may lie in economics.

"There's no doubt that mainstream platforms like Facebook have failed for far too long to step up and respond to the slime and hate that has no place on a site that also hosts family photo albums and local business pages," he says. "The largest sites have grown complacent, thanks to their massive size and market dominance, so they have little fear that new competitors with more responsible policies will emerge as true rivals."

Indeed, essentially every person who uses the internet must adhere to the content-moderation whims of a handful of unelected people whose employers profit directly from online hate and disinformation. Although he opposes government interference that limits online speech — "The last thing I want to do is put Donald Trump and William Barr in charge of a government speech police who decide what people can say online" — Senator Wyden thinks decreasing the power a few people in Silicon Valley wield over billions of others' online experience could help

"It's appropriate for the Justice Department or the Federal Trade Commission to look at whether the largest tech companies are abusing their market position to prevent real competition, to the detriment of internet users across the country," Wyden says. "I think real competition would go a long way toward relegating these hateful sentiments to the dark corners of the internet."

Cole echoes this sentiment: "An antitrust approach may well make sense, to the extent that one of the problems is the control of vast platforms of public debate by a handful of companies."

But how long would that take, and in the meantime how many sick men will post their manifestos to an unmoderated forum that helps galvanize their poisoned thoughts into action?

• • •

Ash Bhat's RoBhat Labs develops apps — including BotCheck me, a Google Chrome extension that alerts Twitter users when they encounter fake accounts — to combat a number of online ills. He forcefully opines that the answer lies not in tech nor in government oversight.

"Being able to speak and be heard goes down to our evolution," he says via e-mail. "We can't deplatform online communities, especially when we disagree with them. The fact that people are killing people is the problem, not deplatforming. We've seen this already! We'll shut down a site and it'll inevitably pop right back up. As a society, the shootings are a sign that there's something incredibly wrong. If anything, we should be listening to these voices. These may be our brothers and sisters — literally."

Although Bhat and Brennan disagree on deplatforming, both refer to the sites' users as victims. The men on these sites likely band together because they share feelings of being left behind, of being unloved. Via the sites, they discover human connection, reprehensible though its conduit may be, that their lives previously lacked. Ironically, they can be seen as victims of the same dehumanizing technology through which they've found fellowship.

Decentralization, a strategy gaining momentum as the general public reaches a crisis with online-inspired murders, could be another way to break the cycle. Decentralization means users control their own data and resources and disseminate them from their own, much smaller networks. This runs counter to centralized computing, wherein the majority of functions are carried out from remote sources owned and operated by corporations. The allure of such a system is that smaller players could wrest back some of the power currently being hoarded by the likes of Facebook, Google, Amazon, YouTube and Twitter. This would make deplatforming nearly impossible, but the hope would be that once big tech's immense power is diminished, increased competition would force sites to become more beholden to users who don't want to share online space with neo-Nazis.

The Mark Zuckerbergs of the world are unlikely to give up their power without a protracted fight, yet Bhat sees this as a more realistic solution — or at least a breaking point.

"Taking the longer-term lens, the clock is ticking for us to figure this out. The internet seems to be transitioning toward decentralization — even Jack Dorsey and Twitter are taking steps toward this," Bhat says. "Someday soon we won't be able to deplatform these voices. It's now or then that we start listening to them."

But this approach cuts both ways: It promises immunity to users, no matter how hateful they may be, while compelling moderators to be smarter about keeping potentially dangerous language off their platforms. It's impossible to predict which side would win out, or even when this day would come. Perhaps that's why Brennan is pushing in the other direction.

• • •

Ron Watkins likens 8kun's plight to that of public figures who've been felled by cancel culture.

"As we enter the start of a new decade, cancel culture has taken hold, and societal shunning is becoming more and more in vogue, with deplatforming representing the internet's equivalent," he says, noting that, thanks to Fredrick Brennan, "8kun weathered many deplatforming attempts even before a single new post was uploaded to the website."

The amorphous nature of the internet — and the "societal shunning" Watkins observes in the real world — means that confronting online hate speech that begets real-world violence can be accomplished only via a diversity of tactics. Internet literacy for politicians and law enforcement, yes; confronting tech monopolies, yes. But even more so it seems we should reappraise the effects the internet can have on individuals and their perception of the real world.

Consider that for this piece I spoke with sources from all stations of life located all over the globe with an ease unimaginable at the dawn of this century. The fact that I was able to gather these voices without leaving my desk is awe-inspiring, just as it's an undoubtedly beautiful thing that a lonely boy in a wheelchair can find community and happiness online.

But as this article was coming together, 8kun users were lamenting the arrest of three white supremacists linked to an extremist group that had threatened violence at the Second Amendment gathering in Virginia on Martin Luther King Jr. Day. They saw it as a missed opportunity for carnage and violence.

Fredrick Brennan tells me at one point that part of the problem with the internet is that it has "no tribal elders, no oral history of what it means or what you should do with it or who should be using it." We are writing that history now. What kind of humanity we imbue this moment with is up to us. ■

"I'm sorry, but sometimes my process becomes unwieldy."

TAKE THE REINS

HEIDI
ROMANOVA
PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAVID MERENYI

Let the beautiful International model, Heidi Romanova take the reins in this lovely pictorial from the photographer, David Merenyi. Barefoot, dressed in an exquisite red dress, Heidi looks irresistible outside with several horses surrounding her. A total animal lover, she is more than comfortable on set. "I like to make beautiful pictures and videos," says Heidi. "My passion is photography!" An easy-going woman, Heidi loves to kick back and enjoy the simpler things in life. "I like to stay at home," she laughs. "I think my special talent is that I can be happy with simple things — I [don't] think many people can do that." Feeling free and connected to the horses, Heidi begins to undress slowly and seductively until she is fully nude, totally immersed in the shoot. "I like all parts of my body, but my favorite is my legs," she tells us confidently. "They're long and beautiful!" When it comes to relationships and sex, Heidi likes a guy who is caring and funny. "The most important quality is a man's sense of humor," she tells us. "My best piece of sex advice for both men and women is to just love each other," she says. Make sure to check out all of Heidi's gorgeous pictorials exclusively on Playboy Plus!

Your First Pet and the Street You Grew Up On

She's not quite [illegible]'s best friend

FICTION BY
KILEY REID

ILLUSTRATION BY
CASEY WELDON

When I came back to Tucson for Christmas break, my mom was like, "You need to clean out your closet or you're not going anywhere." This was her way of being dumb about the fact that I'd gained a few pounds since I'd started college, but I was like *fine* 'cause it was whatever. I was going to buy new shit anyway. My high school friends were having a reunion, Aaron Trujillo was going to be there, and I was obviously going too. So I took a huge trash bag into my closet and started filling it up with stuff I hadn't worn or touched in years. But when I pulled out a very old Halloween costume from when my high school friends and I were Bath & Body Works flavors, underneath it, there was Magenta.

"Oh my God."

"Oh Jesus." She put her little claw in front of her face. "Shit. That's—that's a lot of light…."

"Magenta?"

The plastic cage sat on a shelf next to my old yearbooks and duffel bags. It looked exactly the same. Neon pipes, pink hamster wheel, some toilet paper tubes and a shit ton of mulch. But Magenta was different. She looked a few years older than me, or maybe just more mature. There was new white fur underneath her eyes.

When I was little she walked quietly on all fours, but now she stood up like she had somewhere to be. On top of her gray fur Magenta wore a silky floral robe that she kept fixing and a teeny pair of Uggs that looked like they'd been in the rain. She held her robe closed, and then she waved.

"What are you…how are you still here?"

"Hey, Natalie." Magenta half laughed. "Hey — listen, this doesn't have to be weird. You grew up, you know? You had other things to do. And honestly, I totally understand." She pushed a tuft of fur behind her left ear.

I sat down on my bed. It was weird being back in my room with all of the Got Milk? ads and *Moulin Rouge!* posters taped on the wall above my twin bed. I couldn't remember the last time I saw Magenta, but it must have been when I still had braces and before my hair was red, which seemed like forever ago. I knew I was bad at remembering things (what time my classes were, if I took my birth control, quesadillas in the microwave), but I didn't think I was this bad. "Why do I remember you dying?"

"Ummm…." Magenta winced and I saw all four of her teeth. "Maybe because a lot of your friends' pets died?"

"How would you even know that?"

"You're really loud on the phone."

"Oh. I'm sorry."

"Ohmygosh, don't be. It used to give, like, a rhythm to my day. Back when you still lived here."

Magenta peeked in her pocket and I saw the glow of a tiny cellphone light up inside. She looked back up at me and smiled.

"Well," I said. "Should I feed you or something? Do you need new water?"

"I mean…." Magenta laughed again. "If you want…?"

I stared at my hands on my lap.

"Well, I don't eat stimulants anymore, and I try to stay away from dairy," she said. "So actually, as far as food's concerned, I'm honestly all set."

I had five more days until I went back to school. I kept my closet door open because it felt awful to think of closing it. Magenta made a really big deal of putting her headphones on when I talked on the phone. When I changed my clothes she'd bury herself under a bunch of mulch or pick up a tiny fashion magazine. I knew she was trying to make me comfortable, but it just made me feel worse.

I asked my mom how long she'd been feeding Magenta.

"Well, honey, I don't *feed Magenta*." She laughed like this was a psycho thing to do. "It's not like she's a child. She just makes her grocery list and I pick up a few things."

But it wasn't just a few things. My mom wrapped a tiny iTunes gift card and put it underneath the tree. While we watched *The Devil Wears Prada* on DVD, she sat on the floor and made a mini version of those holiday buckets, the ones with three different kinds of popcorn, and she barely laughed or quoted all the parts we used to love, like when Meryl Streep is all *Why is no one readyyyy?* Or we'd be walking in the mall and she'd want to make "a really quick stop" at some weird, expensive doll store. She'd take forever, and I'd be like, *"Mom."* She'd be like, "Well, honey, Magenta can get *cold."*

"HONEY, I DON'T *FEED MAGENTA*. IT'S NOT LIKE SHE'S A CHILD."

I couldn't wait to go back to Phoenix.

At my dorm I was fucking hilarious. I didn't have class on Fridays. My roommates and I got blackout on the reg. And I did this super funny impression of our dorm's security guard as if he'd just won a million dollars. Or it's more like if he accidentally won a million dollars and he was just finding out. It sounds weird when I say it now, but I swear everyone dies for it. In Tucson I had nothing to say.

Every time I tried to tell my mom about the cool shit I was doing back home in the dorms (growing basil out my window, getting a B in finance), she'd be like, "Well, *excuuuseee* me! I guess I was mistaken, because I thought *this* was your home."

• • •

Lara Brumski was having the reunion at her parents' house. I had to buy a size large, but whatever, I looked good. Still, every time I looked at Aaron Trujillo, he was looking down at his phone. I remembered how it felt when he said Atta girl to me at graduation, when I parallel parked Lara Brumski's truck on the first try, and I just wished he would bring it up, or that someone would arrive and really need their truck parallel parked.

The only time he talked to me at the reunion was after I said I'd seen *The Blind Side* with my mom. "You actually saw that movie?"

He was sitting on the kitchen counter and both his shoes were untied, on purpose. I sucked my stomach in. "Yeah, it wasn't that bad."

"It is that bad," he said. He scratched the side of his shaved head. "It's another one of those movies where white people come in and save the day. And it's like, 'Oh hey, black people, you can be like us! Be like us and then we'll like you!' It's bullshit."

Lara Brumski grinned at me over her beer. "Didn't you say you cried?"

"*Umm,* no," I lied. "I said my mom cried."

Later, in Lara Brumski's backyard, I thought that maybe I

could fix it by drinking more. But then, in the space between Aaron and me, his phone lit up. It said *Message from MAGENTA*. Next to the *M* was a pink heart emoji, and a little mouse face was next to the *A*. My chest suddenly felt like it wasn't even there.

I stood up. "Are you serious right now?"

Aaron said, "Natalie, chill." As I walked out of the backyard, I heard him go, "It's not like anything's happened," but it didn't really seem like he was saying this to me.

Lara Brumski was standing with beers in both her hands as I walked through the kitchen and took the keys from my purse. She looked past me to the sliding glass doors and mouthed to someone, "Oh shit, he told her?"

• • •

Magenta was in pajamas and eating popcorn when I came home. I closed my bedroom door, laid facedown on my bed and began to sob into my sheets.

Magenta said, "Oh God," and then, "Natalie, wait."

I heard her little nails tap at the side of the cage. The sound made my lungs all tight and scrunched up.

"Natalie, listen," she said. "Okay wait, I swear to God? Aaron is just a friend."

I sniffed and turned away from her.

"I'm serious," she said. "He's so random and completely not my type. But even if he was, I'd never do that to you."

I put my hands underneath my face.

"Natalie, don't cry." And then she kind of laughed. "You're gonna make me cry. Do you want to come feed me a little bit?"

I shook my head.

"Come on, like old times! Remember? Man, I'm *staarrvved*. What am I gonna do?" As she said this, she was sort of singing

I sat up straight. If I was really so loud on the phone, then Magenta knew how I'd gone down on Aaron in his car in the rec center parking lot on the Fourth of July, how I begged him to at least think about visiting me at college and how it was only two hours away. "Okay," I said. I crossed my arms. "Okay, yeah. I'd like to feed you."

Magenta laughed and said, "Really?" It was clear she thought I was joking, but when I didn't wipe the snot away from my face — I let it drip down onto my skirt — Magenta closed her mouth and walked to her bowl.

I went to the kitchen and opened the refrigerator. I ripped off a stalk of some hard, green broccoli from the bottom drawer. My mom was watching *Law & Order: SVU* when I passed by the living room. When she saw the broccoli in my hand, she said, "Good for you, Nat!" Before I slammed my door I went, "Shut up, Mom!"

I threw the broccoli into Magenta's cage.

"Okay. Cooool." Magenta nodded slowly. She looked up at me and bit her bottom lip. "Can I be so annoying and ask for some olive oil?"

"No," I said. "I want you to eat it like old times."

Magenta blew through her lips. She walked to the broccoli, the bedding crunched beneath her, and she took a small floret in her hand.

"No," I said. "On all fours."

We stared at each other for what seemed like a long time. We did this until Magenta bent down and began to crawl around the broccoli. She looked as if she were in a game of charades or pretending to steal cookies from a jar that she was more than welcome to have in the first place. I felt like I was watching an adult do the hokey pokey with a child who wasn't theirs — putting their left arm in and their left arm out — at a birthday party they were obligated to attend.

Magenta took a bite. "Okay, umm, squeak squeak?" she said. "Thank you, Natalie. Yummers. Squeak squeak."

I sat down on the floor and hugged my legs.

How was I so fucking fat? Since when had my mom started doing arts and crafts? And did Aaron Trujillo really hate texting as much as he'd told me he did? Because it kind of seemed like he didn't.

Magenta came to the side of the cage and her face looked careful and sad. "Do you feel better?" she asked. "Or not so much."

I shook my head and said, "Not so much."

• • •

On my last night in Tucson, Lara Brumski texted me to say that she and Aaron made out and did some over-the-pants stuff in his parents' garage on Christmas Eve. As I packed my bags, Magenta asked me if I was okay, and we ended up talking for hours. I played my old CDs (Amy Grant, Jewel, Tori Amos, Toni Braxton), and she showed me how she charted what she ate (breakfast, lunch, dinner and snacks). It wasn't as judgy as I'm making it sound. It was actually really nice.

Around midnight, I sat on my suitcase as Magenta organized her things. A little white bandanna was tied on her head, just above her ears. In a corner of her cage were three tiny boxes. One was labeled toss, one said keep, and the last one said donate.

"Hey, just to put it out there," I said, "You could drive back to Phoenix with me tomorrow. I have a closet in my dorm."

Magenta stood up and pushed her fur behind her ears. "Really?"

"It would be cool," I said. "You could even come to class if you wanted."

Obviously Magenta could be a little much, but we had history. Maybe she could help me get up in the morning since she was such an early riser. Maybe I could try some of her healthy eating habits. I felt like I could never forgive Aaron Trujillo and Lara Brumski, but I was the one who forgot Magenta was alive, and she seemed to have forgiven me. Most important, Magenta had always been mine to begin with.

"You know what?" she said. She partially closed one of her eyes.

"I think that sounds really fun."

"Really?"

"Yeah," she said. "You know what, why not? I'm gonna pack my stuff and get my cage ready to go. A change of scenery would be really good for me right now."

But the next morning, Magenta was gone. Her cage was so empty that when I walked over to it, the wheel spun around once by itself. She'd left me a little note that I read using the magnifying glass my mom had on her key chain. Magenta had gotten an internship at a magazine I'd never heard of; she was hoping to be hired soon after, and she was moving in with friends. She hadn't had the heart to tell me, but she wanted to catch up with me soon, when everything cooled down and her schedule wasn't so all over the place. She wished me all the best.

There are times I see knitted boots or a colorful robe in a dollstore window that I think Magenta would like. Something she can wear around the house. I stop and I think about sending them to her, saying something quick and nice in a card that I'd attach, but then I remember that she didn't leave her address.

Writing down my meals actually works. I've lost four pounds, and now I'm kind of dying to see Magenta at brunch or at the places where the bartenders know my name, but I also know that these are places she'd probably never go. That Christmas, when I'd shown Magenta my impression of our dorm security guard winning a million dollars, she'd said, "Sorry…it kinda sounds like I'd have to be there." ■

PLAYBOY'S party jokes

This edition curated by writer, producer, stand-up comedian and pug enthusiast Josh Gondelman

WHEN someone tells you they believe in absolute freedom of speech, tell them their baby isn't that cute and see how they react.—*Josh Gondelman*

A new scientific study shows that 100 percent of the people who think Colin Kaepernick shouldn't protest during NFL games sent angry letters when *Last Man Standing* was canceled.—*J.G.*

PEOPLE say there's never been a better time to be a woman, but I think I would have had a lot of fun accusing my enemies of witchcraft.—*Kate Willett*

AFTER a well-lubricated first date and a night of intoxicated passion, a man and woman awaken in each other's arms.

"Want to go to Starbucks?" the man asks.

"No," comes the terse reply.

"Why not?"

"If I wanted to get called by the wrong name," the woman says, "I would just have sex with you again."—*Alison Leiby*

I'VE never experienced an earthquake, but I *have* rolled over onto my vibrator in my sleep.—*A.L.*

IF everyone gets mad when you "tell it like it is," maybe the way it *actually* is is "you're an asshole."—*J.G.*

ANOTHER couple is on a first date, but these two are struggling. After an agonizingly long lull, the man speaks up.

"You don't look like your picture on Tinder," he says.

Without hesitation the woman replies, "You don't look like someone who's remotely in the league of that picture, so I guess we're even."—*J.G.*

WHEN someone uses racial slurs and blames it on alcohol, as if it wasn't their brain that thought it and their mouth that said it, that's just unfair to alcohol.—*Jess Salomon*

I'M a firm believer in the right to free expression, except in the case of making any more movies that tell Spider-Man's origin story.—J.G.

AND if you want to stifle free speech, might I suggest getting me a puppy. I always shut the hell up when there's a puppy to play with.—*Lauren Vino*

GUY: It sucks that women aren't as horny as guys.

FRIEND: That's actually a myth. Women's sex drives are at least as high as men's.

GUY: Not the women I've been sleeping with!

FRIEND...

GUY: Please never tell anyone about this conversation.—*J.G.*

PEOPLE say it's rude to talk politics at the dinner table, but if you ask me it's way more rude to eat a roast chicken at your polling place.—*J G.*

AFTER 12 years of public education, I really thought I'd be expressing myself through diorama much more in my adult life.—*Hannah Boone*

PROPPED up in an Irish bar, a man leans over to the drinker beside him.

"Hey," he says. "Just so you know, I'm hung like a horse."

"Oh really?"

"Well, I frequently pee in the street during parades."—*J.G.*

THE way I most frequently exercise my male privilege is by constantly forgetting whether my pores are supposed to be big or small. *J.G.*

Playboy's Rearview

Rabbit-hop through time as we recall important anti-censorship moments from the magazine's first four decades, from battling the top postman to interviewing an outlaw—plus one regrettable hiccup

1950s

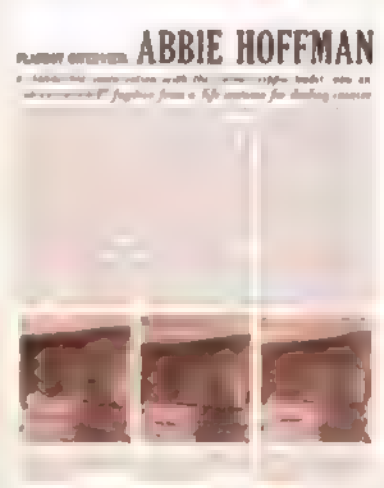
Not even a year into its existence, PLAYBOY faced its first major battle against censorship. After applying for a second-class mailing permit in 1954 and being denied, initially on technical grounds and then because Postmaster General Arthur Summerfield deemed the magazine obscene, Hugh Hefner took the Post Office to court. Hefner's 1955 victory was resounding, but until the end of his term as postmaster, in 1961, Summerfield waged a broader war to keep "obscenity"—his version of it, anyway—out of American mailboxes. In 1958 the Post Office tried once again to stop distribution of PLAYBOY (the November issue at left) on vague grounds of obscenity. Like Summerfield's other per postal project, delivering the mail by missile, the effort failed, landing with a thud.

1960s

When PLAYBOY accepted the short story *Nine Lives* for publication, editors didn't realize the author J.K. Le Guin, was Ursula. After learning the truth, they still wanted the story (about clones in space) for the November 1969 issue but asked permission to keep the byline as it was, apparently afraid of alienating their male audience. Le Guin (pictured below) agreed and supplied a short bio for *Playbill* hinting at a secret behind the author's identity. "It is commonly suspected that the writings of U.K. Le Guin are not actually written by U.K. Le Guin but by another person of the same name." Sci-fi readers would get the joke. Her novel *The Left Hand of Darkness*, published under her full name, had made a huge splash. Later, Le Guin regretted acquiescing to PLAYBOY. "It was the first (and is the only) time I met with anything I understood as sexual prejudice, prejudice against me as a woman writer, from any editor or publisher, and it seemed so silly, so grotesque, that I failed to see that it was also important," she wrote in 1975. The next time PLAYBOY published a Le Guin story, *Unlocking the Air*, it was with her full byline.

1970s

By the time Abbie Hoffman sat for the May 1976 *Playboy Interview*, he was one of America's most prominent social activists. He was also a fugitive. The Yippie co-founder, Chicago Seven defendant and author of *Steal This Book* had jumped bail in 1974 after being arrested and jailed for dealing cocaine. On the run, he'd taken extreme steps to hide his identity, moving frequently and undergoing plastic surgery, and was initially grateful for a platform to share his revolutionary views. "PLAYBOY is, in effect, saying that it won't cooperate with the government in its attempt to capture and cage me," he said. "Hugh is putting his ass on the line, no doubt about it." But after the piece came out, Hoffman agonized to various New York journalists that the story had blown his cover. "Did Hefner's henchman strip the mask from the Yippie desperado?" asked *The Village Voice* on May 3, 1976. The clear answer: Nope. Hoffman lived "underground" until September 1980 before turning himself in to authorities, ultimately serving about one year in prison.



1980s

Since 1931 the Library of Congress has published Braille versions of magazines. In 1970 PLAYBOY joined their ranks—"our gift to the government and the blind community," editors said. But in July 1985, Republican representative Chalmers Wylie of Ohio successfully led a vote to cut off funding for the Braille PLAYBOY. It had too much talk of "wanton and illicit sex," he complained. Outraged, blind readers, the Blinded Veterans Association, Playboy, the American Library Association and others joined forces to sue the government and overturn what they saw as "blatant, paternalistic censorship" that violated First Amendment rights. In August 1986 the courts agreed, declaring the move unconstitutional and restoring blind subscribers' right to read PLAYBOY for the articles.

Explore these pieces and more at iPlayboy.com.

playback • *n.* recorded sound or

playboy • *n.* a wealth
his time enjoying hi

player • *n.* 1 *a person*

YUSI Dubbs

Model @YUSIDUBBS

Photographer by JESTON BRANDON | @PERFECTLYFLAWLESSPHOTO

MUA @NICHELLEMUA

Tell us something surprising about you?
English is not my first language, I was actually born and raised in Cuba.

Were you excited to shoot for Playboy?
I was so excited I couldn't sleep lol! I was just so surprised because all of this happened so fast. So I was nervous too.

What inspires you?
In my opinion there is nothing more inspirational than women who support and uplift each other.

Why did you choose to pursue a career in modeling?
I only started this year. A photographer reached out to me and asked to shoot me for an Australian magazine and I was like "sure, sounds like fun."

Who do you look up to in the modeling industry?
I can't narrow it down to just one person because I look up to many different people across various modeling platforms, including high fashion, runway, swimsuit, and fitness modeling. I just love everything about the modeling industry.

What are some of your hobbies?
Reading, shopping, and binging Netflix.

Name three things on your bucket list?
Travel to the Maldives, See the Northern Lights, go on a safari.

Turn-ons
Manners, politeness, intelligence, confidence. I like a Gentleman. Someone who opens the door for you and pulls your chair out. Most guys don't even know what this means lol.

Turn-offs
Rudeness, arrogance, intentional ignorance.

Describe to us your perfect date
"That's a tough one. I'd have to say April 25th. Because it's not too hot, not too cold, all you need is a light jacket" My favorite quote from Miss Congeniality lol.

Which world capital would you most like to visit, and why?
Paris because of the beautiful architecture and of course my love for macaron pastries.

What is your mantra?
I could live in a mansion or a van as long as I'm happy :)

SEXGAMEBOOK

THE PLAYBOY SYMPOSIUM

On Voting & Democracy

Who Counts?

BY **ALICIA GARZA**

Our *Symposium* guest editor is a Black Lives Matter co-founder and voting-rights activist; her insights into the myth of American power could not be more urgent

The Constitution of the United States took a little more than 100 days to develop, yet it has taken 200 years and counting to fully realize. In it, the framework of this nation was established, and the process for building the nation was outlined with both painstaking detail and maddening vagueness.

The Constitution sought to establish a nation where freedom could take root — through the theft of sovereign land, the attempted genocide of the original stewards of that land and the enslavement of what would turn out to be millions of human beings. In an attempt to escape the tyranny of a corrupt monarchy, the so-called founding fathers mimicked much of what they left behind.

The project of building a new nation, while in some ways a departure from the most egregious offenses experienced under monarchical rule, was still predicated on the principles of power over rather than power with. The result was a new nation built on a system that had existed for hundreds of years: one person at the top, now with a series of checks and balances to ensure that no one person could abuse their power. In the end, more people got to be powerful, and rules were designed to make sure those powerful people kept their power.

Power, broadly defined, is the ability to make decisions over your own life and the lives of others. There are different forms of power, and political power — the ability to decide how decisions are made — is what the Constitution sought to establish. The Constitution did not seek to transform power itself, nor did it ever promise to. Instead, it ensured that more people had access to the ultimately corrupt forms of power that some had been denied.

The Constitution was an extraordinarily ambitious project but perhaps one that was doomed to fail from its inception.

I think about the Constitution often these days. I wonder how it came to be that a few dozen dudes with powdered wigs and slaves could come together for a few months and hammer out a whole series of systems that would not only have an undeniable impact on my life many generations later but would also set the terms for the fights of today. Did the dudes in wigs anticipate that 200-plus years later we would have someone leading the country with a wig of much lower caliber?

All insults aside, I've heard it said many times that the Constitution was designed for moments like this one, when everything is at stake. I don't have any way of knowing what its authors' intentions were — given the fact that people like me were counted as only three fifths of a human being, primarily for the purpose of apportioning power and resources — but I can confidently say this: Who counts, who gets to decide and who shapes the rules that define what the decisions are in the first place — all of this matters. A lot.

Who counts is predicated, at least in the Constitution of this nation, on power — who gets it, who doesn't. That is why no woman was assured the right to vote until the ratification of the 19th Amendment in 1920 — a century ago this year and 133 years after the Constitution was written. It is why a black person who was enslaved did not count as a whole person until 1868, three years after slavery was formally abolished and more than 80 years after the first draft of the Constitution was written.

Millions of people across the nation show up every four years to make their opinions known. Who makes the rules, and who shapes the terrain on which the rules are made, is arguably more important than our political parties and the ideologies that once defined them. Meanwhile, voter suppression, gerrymandering and redistricting loom over our polling places, along with a host of other pressing issues including climate disaster, police violence, equal pay and health care.

This year brings a new decade as well as what may be one of the most important elections of my lifetime. There is much more at stake than who becomes the commander in chief; this is a fight for who counts and who gets to shape the laws the rest of us are governed by. What happens in the 2020 election will have an undeniable impact on the structure and function of democracy itself.

Over the past decade we saw social movements emerge across the country, from Occupy Wall Street to Idle No More to Black Lives Matter to MeToo to the Women's March. These movements unearthed what had previously been below the surface: financial instability as a result of the rampant speculation and greed allowed by capitalism; climate devastation and its human impact; state-sanctioned violence and antiblack racism; racialized resentment and antagonism; sexual assault and violence at the hands of the powerful. What was once invisible erupted like geysers, and finally the whole world could witness, examine, contemplate and take a side.

The writers in this Symposium are some of the sharpest thinkers and doers in the country. They are the courageous ones who stand with those who have not had a seat at the table, those the table was deliberately designed not to accommodate. Here, we explore critical questions facing our country today: who matters, how change happens, who is being left behind and what we can do to transform the way power operates — once and for all.

Alicia Garza is co-founder of the Black Lives Matter movement and founder of Black Futures Lab, which aims to empower black voters.

ILLUSTRATION BY **GEORGE MCCALMAN**

As Goes the South

LATOSHA BROWN

If you think the South is a bastion of retrograde conservatism, a co-founder of Black Voters Matter has news for you

In October 2018 I pulled up to a community center in Jefferson County, Georgia to meet with a group of senior citizens and talk about the importance of voting. Many of them had heard of the Black Voters Matter bus — what we call the "Blackest Bus in America" — and they wanted to go outside and see it. So we wrapped up the program, went out to the bus and had an impromptu pep rally, singing and dancing to the music of James Brown and Al Green.

My new friends asked if they could ride the bus down the block to vote early as a group. After folks had hopped on and just as we were pulling away, staffers from the center stopped us. Someone had seen the "black" bus and called a local official, who told the center to unload the seniors immediately.

These were fully competent adults who wanted to go vote. The official had no legal right to stop our trip. Sadly, this is only one of countless examples of politicians choking the black vote through apparent fear and intimidation.

When people hear stories about Jefferson County and other places in the South, they assume these are staunchly Republican states and always will be. The truth is the South is the fastest-growing region in the country and is becoming more racially and politically diverse. The South has 10 of the 15 most rapidly expanding cities in the nation. This growth is driven primarily by young people, LGBTQ people and people of color. In 2018 and 2016, millennials and other younger generations outvoted baby boomers and other older cohorts. These young voters tend to identify as independents, but they also tend to support progressive policies and candidates.

In 2019 Democrats won total control of Virginia's government — both chambers of the legislature and the governorship — for the first time in more than two decades. Kentucky elected a Democratic governor over a Republican incumbent who had modeled himself after Trump. And a Democratic governor won a second term in Louisiana. The South, even the Deep South, is not as red as many people believe it to be.

In 2018 we witnessed an increase in Democratic turnout in the heart of the Confederacy, including Georgia, Alabama, Texas and Mississippi. Part of the surge was inspired by younger, more dynamic candidates such as Stacey Abrams, Andrew Gillum and Beto O'Rourke. There is tremendous growth potential for progressives to win in the South, especially for candidates willing to expand the electorate and bring in new voters.

Demographics are changing, but demographics are not destiny. The biggest threat to building power and expanding democracy in the South is voter suppression. It comes in many forms, including the fear and intimidation we saw in Jefferson County, structural and policy barriers to voting, and misinformation to confuse voters and drive down their interest in turning out. On Election Day in 2018, for example, law enforcement in Jackson, Mississippi set up roadblocks near a polling site. In Crisp County, Georgia seven law-enforcement vehicles arrived to issue a parking ticket to a black city commissioner who had offered rides to the polls all day in a borrowed limousine.

Since Republicans can't win on their ideas, they've taken to cheating by way of purging voters from the rolls, passing restrictive voter-ID laws, gerrymandering, shutting down polling locations and more. In 2018 election officials in Randolph County, Georgia tried to close down seven of the nine polling places in the predominantly black community. The county abandoned the plan only after an overwhelming public outcry and national media attention.

Some 36 states have voter-ID laws that require people to possess specific forms of identification in order to vote. In Texas a gun license is an acceptable document, but a student ID is not. Voter-ID laws set up hurdles that hurt poor people, people of color, students and others who can't afford the required documents or have other reasons for lacking identification. Nationwide, up to 25 percent of African American citizens of voting age don't have government-issued photo IDs, compared with only eight percent of whites.

When all else fails, election officials simply kick voters off the rolls, erasing their right to vote as though they never existed. Nationwide, at least 17 million voters were purged from the rolls between 2016 and 2018, according to the Brennan Center for Justice at New York University School of Law. Georgia alone just booted about 300,000 voters under a new state provision that encourages purges when voters are "inactive."

As if this weren't enough, disinformation campaigns specifically targeted black voters in 2016 and may do so again in 2020. The Russian Internet Research Agency used Facebook ads, memes and fake websites to discourage black people from voting. On social media platforms, a U.S. Senate committee found, "no single group of Americans was targeted…more than African Americans." These efforts were shockingly successful: In 2016, for the first time in 20 years, black voter turnout for a presidential election declined.

So how do we shift the South? First, we disrupt the culture of fear by creating hope. We need to empower progressive candidates and campaigns that will build a coalition of diverse voters and challenge structural barriers to voting. We should not look at the South as a region that's deeply conservative but a region that's severely underfunded, its people's power underutilized.

We can build a more just America, and the South is ground zero for this transformation. Once we shift the power dynamics rooted in fear and divisiveness in the South, we will shift this nation. We believe that our work in the South will make the difference.

We are doing the work. Ultimately we will win.

LaTosha Brown is co-founder of Black Voters Matter and the Southern Black Girls and Women's Consortium.

Before the Ballot

BY RASHAD ROBINSON

The Color of Change president explains how voters can tip the scales toward real criminal justice

Not every vote has the same impact. I don't say that because some people's votes are disqualified for politically motivated reasons or because the electoral college renders some people's votes less potent than others'. All that is true. What I mean to say is that whether we get what we want from our votes has little to do with the election itself. Our votes lead to change only when a social movement backs them up.

This has certainly been the case with recent successes in criminal-justice reform. The 2020 candidates are talking about this issue today because we made reform feel possible and necessary in our communities and our culture first.

We currently lock up more people in jails, detention centers and prisons than any other country in the world: around 2.3 million, one in five of them for nonviolent drug offenses. We ensnare another nearly 4.5 million people in the probation and parole system, which often serves as just another way to exploit them financially before ultimately sending many of them back to jail or prison. On any given night American jails house 731,000 people, 76 percent of whom haven't been convicted of a crime. Most people get trapped in the system because they can't afford bail, which prosecutors and judges often set out of reach.

And that doesn't even include the policing side of criminal justice: the life-altering and community-destroying violations of our rights, the harassment and violence (including sexual violence) committed by law enforcement officers across the country every day, largely targeting communities of color. The entire system, in fact, is defined by racial bias and racial disparities — from prosecutors who pursue harsher sentences for black people than for white people for the same crime to an incarcerated population that is 40 percent black, even though black people represent only 13 percent of the U.S. population. "Reform" doesn't begin to capture what's needed, but it's the first step.

The movement pushing for reform in this space has risen over the past several years, amplified by social media and online organizing campaigns. It made politicians accountable long after the election was over and made them deliver on real policy change. But it didn't happen overnight.

On the first day of 2009, Oscar Grant was killed, and footage of his death subsequently went viral. Residents in Oakland, California took to the streets in protest. The recording of George Zimmerman's 911 call moments before he shot and killed Trayvon Martin in 2012 was shared on social media and moved Floridians into action, along with millions of their allies across the country. Then, in the summer of 2014, came the uprising in Ferguson, Missouri after the killing of Michael Brown. St. Louis–area activists not only demanded an end to police violence but also showed how money bail, excessive ticketing and other exploitative, racially driven practices had become so standard that city budgets were sustained on the backs of the black people they targeted. The 2015 death of Sandra Bland in Texas moved more people to raise their voices about abusive policing, pre-trial detention in jail and the refusal of local prosecutors to hold law enforcement accountable.

These moments and many others became highly visible symbols of the day-to-day injustice in our system and empowered a new wave of activism focused on racial justice. Everyday people were driven into the streets, into the media, into public service and into philanthropic endeavors.

And then into the polls. We used the vote to end the careers of politicians standing in the way of reform and to elevate those committed to it. New, black-led initiatives (like those of my own organization, Color of Change) sprouted across the country,

aiming to channel the new wave of energy into the political process. While the federal debate is important, more than 80 percent of America's prison population is incarcerated at the local and state levels. We put forward-thinking district attorneys, judges, sheriffs, governors and attorneys general on the ballot and made sure they got into office. Afterward, continued pressure made them deliver on their promises. This new political influence is a result of efforts by formerly incarcerated people and others from impacted communities — all essential leaders in campaigns targeting money-bail profiteers, changing what the public demands from prosecutors and so much more.

The power of culture also helped amplify the power of our movement and, ultimately, the power of our votes. Michelle Alexander's best-selling book The New Jim Crow, as well as Ava DuVernay's Emmy-winning documentary 13th and recent Netflix series When They See Us are just a few examples of popular media that helped paint a clearer picture of a violently unjust criminal-justice system. Jay-Z, John Legend, Colin Kaepernick and many others, including those behind the scenes brave enough to move such projects forward, took on money bail, policing and other issues. They've all helped disrupt deeply held beliefs about crime and punishment that are rooted in racism and capitalism, and their efforts fuel the larger movement.

That momentum has forced politicians and decision makers to do things they didn't want to do, thought they couldn't do or thought they could get away with not doing. Candidates in 2020, from those running for prosecutor to those running for president, are all talking about criminal-justice reform. Former vice president Joe Biden, Senator Kamala Harris and others have been compelled to answer for their past criminal-justice policies. This line of questioning would have been unthinkable in the 2012 election. We've changed the standards for what it takes to win our votes.

Very little in politics just happens. Political discourse is guided by the public's demand for change. Criminal justice is now inextricably tied to the ballot because people forced the issue into public debate. But no matter what happens at the polls in November, our work isn't done. We have to ensure that once the election is over, campaign rhetoric translates into legal action. We have to continue to make our voices heard before our votes can drive change.

Rashad Robinson is president of Color of Change, a leading racial-justice organization with more than 1.5 million members.

Two Evils

BY ANGELA PEOPLES

When is "party solidarity" worse than voting your conscience–especially for marginalized Americans? A grassroots political strategist weighs in

As Democrats place their bets on who will lead the party in the fight to defeat President Trump in November, a consensus has emerged among the base: We must get behind the candidate with the best chance of beating 45, no matter what. "Party solidarity" suggests that voters should support the nominee put forth by one of the two dominant political parties — even if that candidate has a history of racist policymaking or of mistreatment of women or simply doesn't align with one's core values. This mentality degrades our democratic system and stifles the power of this country's emerging majority.

Let's be clear: The consequences of elections are real. Countless lives have been lost or forever damaged by Trump's presidency. The desire to vote him out by any means necessary is visceral and righteous; it is about our survival. But voters must remember that we have options in 2020. Polls have shown that most of the top-ranked Democrats would beat Trump in a general election. Before we dust off those "lesser of two evils" talking points, it's important to seriously consider the short- and long-term impact on historically disenfranchised voters. In effect, we could be asking them to set aside their conscience and cast their vote for a politician who may not be the worst-case scenario but is certainly close.

During the 2012 Democratic National Convention, Representative John Lewis said, "Your vote is precious, almost sacred. It is the most powerful nonviolent tool we have to create a more perfect union." As corruption, outsize corporate influence and foreign interference continue to erode our government and election systems, the urgency of Lewis's words becomes more evident. For many Americans, especially those who have historically been denied the right to participate in the system, voting is one of the few bits of political capital we have — an investment in our values and a chance to ensure those values are reflected in political and legal institutions. What is a voter to do with this most "precious" and "sacred" resource when the only options are candidates with track records of acting against your values and pursuing policies that cause irrevocable harm to your community?

Voting for a candidate just because you think they have the best chance of winning directly reinforces white supremacy. The idea of electability is based on who has historically been able to run for office and cast a vote in this country. Whether it was the three-fifths compromise, literacy tests, prison walls, poll taxes, the recent voter-ID laws or voter-roll purges, our federal and state governments have gone to great lengths to ensure that the vast majority of people deciding who is electable are straight cis white men with means.

Even as the pool of eligible voters becomes more black, brown, young and progressive, the mainstream continues to prioritize the same demographic over and over again, just as the founding fathers intended.

This trend of voting for the party's nominee against your better judgment also weakens the political power of women and people of color. Take for example the case of Governor Ralph "Blackface" Northam of Virginia. In the summer of 2017 I led a project called In Charge: Black Women Taking Action. Our mission was to organize black women to get out the vote for governor. Northam was your textbook "safe bet" Democratic nominee, and he was running against Ed Gillespie, who ran a campaign that was deemed overtly racist and bigoted Northam was certainly the "lesser of two evils," but there was nothing about his candidacy that would draw black voters out in the numbers he needed to win. Groups including BlackPAC and Collective PAC worked to mobilize black women and community leaders to vote. Northam became governor of the Commonwealth of Virginia due in large part to high turnout among black voters in the Hampton Roads and Virginia Beach areas.

It stands to reason that if black voters played a significant role in handing Northam the gubernatorial election, then black community voices would receive significant weight and consideration in his decisions. But when Northam was accused of appearing in blackface in a photo that surfaced at the beginning of last year, he ignored the calls of thousands of his black and brown constituents and refused to resign. The Virginia Legislative Black Caucus issued a statement calling for his resignation, and NAACP leaders organized a number of protests in the state, but Northam remains in office, having faced little to no consequences. His refusal to bow to political pressure from the very people who elected him is more harmful to black voters than 10 pictures of him in blackface: It sends a message to future candidates and the general public that it's actually not necessary to be accountable to black people and anti-racist voters. It means that even overtly racist behavior in the past is excusable if your opponent is just a little bit more racist.

I regret asking black women in Virginia to vote for a candidate like Ralph Northam. I won't make the same mistake in 2020.

This election cycle, I'm committed to organizing with black voters and progressive voters to support a candidate who not only aligns with my values but is enthusiastically ready to be accountable to my community. With so much at stake, we can't afford to just donate our vote — that most precious and sacred tool John Lewis spoke of — in the name of "party solidarity."

Angela Peoples is co-founder of cultural and political brand the South and director of Black Womxn For.

Silencing the Status Quo

BY MARISA FRANCO

When American outsiders organize, their combined voices can change elections—and the co-founder of Mijente has proof

The act of casting a vote in an election is one of the largest mass political rituals in this country. For many millions of people, it's the only explicitly political act they perform. But for many millions of others, voting feels like a futile effort.

Compared with other democratic countries, the U.S. has had one of the lowest voter-turnout percentages in recent years. Over the past 40 years, an average of 62.7 percent of the country's eligible population has exercised their right to vote. Why is more than a third of the American populace opting out?

Voting functions as a political oil change. In ideal circumstances it allows for an organized battle of ideas and ensures a smooth transition between elected representatives. But for groups of people who constantly face structural oppression, the maintenance of a system that doesn't serve them is of little concern. Despite the pervasive narrative in the media, the lack of turnout isn't all about apathy. It may actually be an active expression of discontent with the status quo.

During the 2018 midterm elections, my organization, Mijente, focused its efforts on mobilizing Latinx immigrants in Georgia. We knocked on thousands of doors to talk with voters about the governor's race, advocating for Stacey Abrams. We anticipated pushback from Latinx voters but found instead that people were curious. In conversations they wondered if their vote actually mattered and whether there was a substantive difference between the political parties. Mostly, however, they revealed that no one ever came to speak to them about elections.

Those immigrant and Latinx voters in Georgia, along with all other infrequent or inactive voters, must be welcomed into the conversation before it's time to vote if we want them to show up. The critical act of voting must be combined with collective organizing efforts — in advance — if we want the elected to represent the entire population and not just a privileged fraction of it.

Although individuals run for office and individuals cast ballots, it's collective groups who set the terms of the debates leading up to the election. Following the 2008 election of Barack Obama and amid one of the most significant financial crises in the century, we saw the rise of the Tea Party. One of the movement's major tenets was fiscal conservatism: It took a hard line against increasing the national debt. This became the dominant issue of discussion, which prevented the government from addressing social issues that would require funding.

Under the Trump administration, on the other hand, fiscal hawks have become crickets. Rising debt has become insignificant as plans to build border walls and wage wars abroad have taken precedence. In both instances, organized and well-resourced groups have created political terms that have real policy impact. Nothing in politics is serendipitous.

Now more than ever, political underdogs are stepping up and making sure their collective voices are heard. Over the past several electoral cycles, undocumented communities have demanded a stop to deportations. In doing so, they have affected public perception of immigration policy and disrupted preconceived notions of who gets to speak about these issues. Similarly, when the Sunrise Movement gained traction last fall, candidates were forced to take positions on climate change and the Green New Deal.

These organizers contest the notion that all we need to do is maintain business as usual. Their efforts have also helped shape the candidate pool for this coming election. An unprecedented number of women and LGBTQ people, many of them community organizers and advocates, are running for office. These insurgent campaigns challenge the GOP as well as the

Democratic Party status quo. On a smaller scale, several states are becoming electoral battlegrounds where the political parties that have comfortably held power are being challenged. The 2019 election results in Virginia demonstrated this as Democrats took control of the previously red state. As the Latinx population grows, states like Arizona and Texas are likely to begin trending in this direction as well.

A record 32 million Latinxs are projected to be eligible to vote in this year's election, making them the largest racial and ethnic minority group in the electorate. An estimated 27 percent of those who cast ballots in the 2018 midterms were firsttime midterm voters. Our power, as outsiders, is rising.

Those of us who have been targeted by the Make America Great Again narrative have an opportunity to reshape the terms of the election. We can use our vote to ensure that democracy is not simply a ritual by which we choose the "lesser of two evils" but a system that offers viable options for political representation.

Through deep organizing we can motivate people to fight like hell for the solutions we seek to the challenges of our time. In doing so, we can make our government work for the many — like every democracy should — instead of for the few.

Marisa Franco is co-founder of Mijente, a social-justice hub for Latinx and Chicanx people. She is based in Arizona

Ellie VAN HORNE

Tell us something surprising about you?
I am a huge comic book nerd and frequent Comicon's as much as I am able to. Dressing up in Cosplay is one of my favourite things to do!

Were you excited to shoot for Playboy?
I was both nervous and excited. Everyone was so supportive and nice it was a truly amazing experience.

What inspires you?
I am extraordinarily lucky to have such supportive and loving people in my life. They really inspire me to go out of my comfort zone.

Why did you choose to pursue a career in modelling?
I like to try new things, and when the opportunity to model came I jumped on it! I was lucky to be at the right place at the right time.

Who do you look up to in the modelling industry?
I have always looked up to Marissa Miller. I used to have pictures of her posted around my home to motivate me to go to the gym.

What are some of your hobbies?
I love to read, I play cello, and have recently started boxing.

Name three things on your bucket list?
Start a business, go hot air ballooning, and use my time and skills to help people.

Turn-ons
Muscular Calves, sense of humour, intelligence, and a love of comic books definitely doesn't hurt.

Turn-offs
Being overly aggressive, speaking over people, unwilling to try new things, and bad breath.

Describe to us your perfect date.
I personally dread first dates, so my perfect date would be one in which I forget I am on a date. We both have a natural conversation and laugh. I hate feeling like I am playing 20 questions because it takes the intimacy out of getting to know each other.

Which world capital would you most like to visit, and why?
I would love to visit Tokyo. I love Japanese culture and food. I have also promised my sister that I would visit it with her so hopefully we can go this year.

What is your mantra?
No one can make you happy but yourself.

"This doesn't mean I don't believe in freedom of speech, okay?"

"Shadow-ban this."

average
acceptance
now

Notes of a web-slaying comedian and *Black Lady Sketch Show* cast member who's fed up with the insane demands of capitalism, showbiz and social media

BY **QUINTA BRUNSON**

In 2016 I went to the Shorty Awards, a show that honors greatness in internet culture, at which you can be nominated for top comedy performance of the year along with a dog that went viral for having a tongue that hangs out all the time. It's humbling.

Anyhoo, I took a picture on the green carpet of an awards show I didn't necessarily want to be at. In all honesty, I was embarrassed. I dreamt of the Emmys, the Golden Globes — even the ESPYs, where I would present an award and offer comic relief next to LeBron James. An internet awards show felt beneath me.

I posted the green-carpet selfie on Instagram. For the most part the comments were kind and complimentary, filled with "yes girl!" and "slay gorgeous." But there was one that has stuck with me for four years.

"Eh, she's so average looking."

Average. I don't know if the person who wrote that comment meant to insult me but.... I take it back; I'm pretty sure that was 100 percent their intention. My first thought was no thought. The comment just kind of had me staring at it and trying to understand how I felt, whether to care and if I should say something back. I didn't, but I did care. At that point in my career I wanted to be outstandingly good at my job and to be considered pretty at least. I thought what probably everyone has thought, including the person who left the comment: In order to be worth something in this world, you have to be above average.

One definition of average is "the usual or ordinary standard, level or quantity." If anything, average sounds, dare I say, *comfortable?* Constantly fighting to be more than average or even less than average seems exhausting, like entering yourself in a race you can't win while committing to being sweaty and out of breath for the rest of your life. When I had this epiphany, years later, I knew I needed to reevaluate my place in the endless race — and to ask myself why I wanted to run it in the first place.

I needed to take a stand: Average Acceptance Now.

Like most of us, I was taught to aim for the stars. In school we were told, "Look at George Washington Carver. He fucking invented peanut butter. You should strive to be just as amazing." And look, I get it. I really do. But I wish I'd also learned something like "Look at Ms. Johnson, your computer teacher. She loves her job and has a nice house and a cool family."

For me, a little girl who grew up on the west side of Philly, right at the intersection of the rich kids from UPenn and my friends who robbed the rich kids from UPenn, more realistic portrayals of a good life might have helped. While I think George Washington Carver was absolutely a fucking G, I wish I could have been impressed by my own father, a man who went to work and took care of his family every day. (Also, I wish I had noticed the boys at school instead of worshiping Omarion from B2K and actually thinking I had a shot with him.)

Dear capitalism: Your insistence on obscene wealth is partly to blame. Bernie and Warren talk about the vanishing middle class, which is great, but what about America's *average* class? After all, their electorate includes countless Americans who are not extraordinary or basic. The *We're the Millers* of the world. Pleasantly average.

Mainstream media, you're guilty too: You've promoted unhealthy and unattainable standards of beauty that have disturbed the psyches of all genders in America. You tell us that anything less than physical perfection is shameful — unless we have some weird quirk that can be marketed as "strong" or "brave" instead. But I'm not going to give you another lashing for your part in the war on the average. You get it every day, and you don't care. No, instead I'm going to focus on an issue closer to my heart.

The regular black girl can barely exist and be praised for it the way "everyday beautiful" starlets like Saoirse Ronan, Emma Stone and Brie Larson are. Don't get me wrong, I think these women are beautiful, but I don't see the same attention lavished on your everyday beautiful black girl actress or singer. If you happen to look like the average black girl, you're subject to scrutiny over whether or not you're attractive, the ways in which you look like an animal or a man and why women like you should be liked based on your talent, not your looks. Social media and the inflated currency of likes and shares are also to blame. We're all caught in the dirty cycle.

So I'm going to help break that cycle. I started here: Over the New Year's weekend, I went to Big Bear, California with some friends. I was so excited about heading to a cabin with people who have known me for years and always loved me for who I am. But on the way there, zigzagging through majestic mountains, I received a text. I was invited to a New Year's party thrown by a celebrity back in Los Angeles. Part of me wanted to somehow race back to the city and show

PHOTOGRAPHY BY **MANCY GANT**

In school we were told, "Look at George Washington Carver. He fucking invented peanut butter."

face at this party — to take bomb pictures and really flex on the 'gram. To be among the above average and prove I was one of them.

Not this time. Why would I want to go to a party where I would be forced to evaluate my status every other second, hovering over the snacks table and agonizing, *Am I famous too? Just a little bit? Like goofyfriend-in-1980s-sitcom famous at least?*

So I responded, "Thank you so much for the invite. I got my own things going on. All the best in the new year."

I chose my life.

I shut my phone off, looked around the car and almost shed one single G tear from the overabundance of peace I felt. I had left the race and decided to sit at the finish line. Because it turns out the finish line isn't at the end of the race at all; it's wherever people love your average-ass self.

Oh, and the anonymous user who left that mean comment on my Shorty Awards pic? Reader, I went to that person's page. They looked exactly like me. I hope I've embodied their every word.

Model **@ELEKTRA.SKY**
ONLYFANS.COM/ELEKTRASKY

Photography by **BARRY NADELL | @WEEKENDCOWBOYPHOTOGRAPHY**
PR **LSA PUBLICATIONS | @LSAPUBLICATIONS @LEO.ALDERMAN**

Tell us something surprising about you
#1- traveled the country for 10 years showing Arabian horses. #2- competitive gymnast for 5 years #3 pole dancing instructor

Were you excited to shoot for playboy?
Incredibly excited! I've always wanted to shoot for playboy and I've finally made that a reality several times this past year!

What inspires you?
Being in the presence of creative, open minded and positive people who focus on the beauty of life that surrounds them.

Why did you choose to pursue a career in modeling?
I love glamour, fashion and traveling the world to shoot in exotic locations, all while creating amazing content.

Do you feel more like a city person or a country person?
I love the city life but I will always remain a county girl at heart. You can take the girl out of the country but you can't take the country out of the girl!

Do you have a secret talent?
Dancing with fire as a burlesque performer.

Turn-ons?
A strong and sexy man that knows how to handle me inside and outside of the bedroom. I prefer empowered alpha males who know what they want and aren't afraid to go after it.

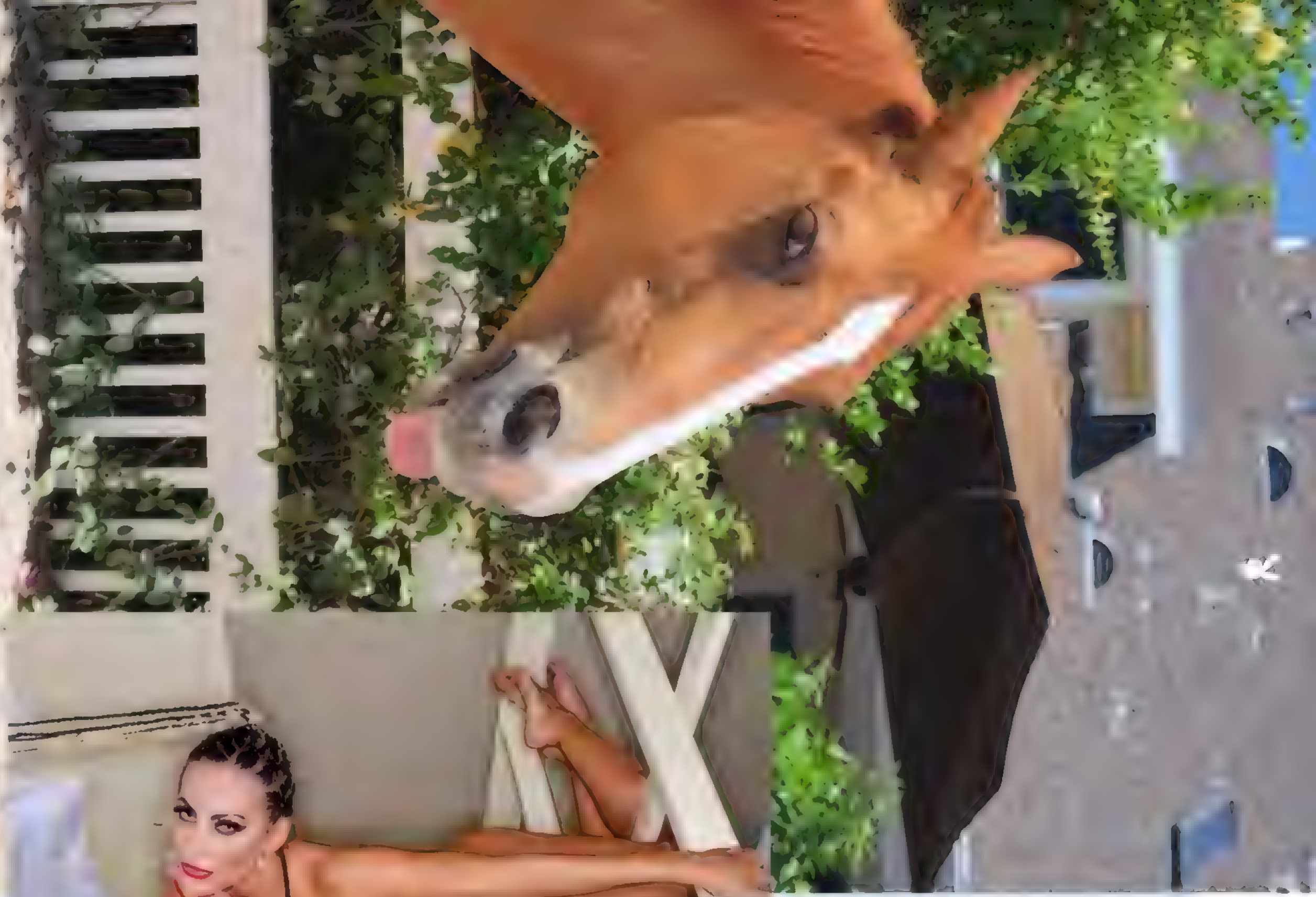
Turn-offs?
Players, when I'm trying to settle down and clingy controlling men when I'm trying to play.

Do you prefer kissing or cuddling?
I prefer cuddling in the morning and kissing when the sun goes down. I'm an extremely passionate person so he's definitely got to know how to kiss and pay attention to my body language so he can know how to please me.

Favorite shoot location?
I absolutely loved the nude beach in Jamaica at the Bahia Principe luxury resort. The water is crystal clear blue and the sunsets looked like they were painted in the sky. Truly breathtaking. Being able to shoot nude without anyone yelling at us is always a bonus as well haha!

What is one thing people may be surprised to find out about you?
I have a beautiful yellow pet albino python snake. His name is RA. Named after the Egyptian sun God.

Any last words you would like to share with your readers?
Chase dreams not people. Love makes the wildest spirit tame and the tamest spirit wild. Set your life on fire and seek those who fan your flames.



SF SX: THE DIRTY MIND GUIDE 2 TALKING DIRTY

HEADQUARTERS OF THE *DIRTY MIND*, A COLLECTIVE OF SUBVERSIVE REBELS FIGHTING FOR SEXUAL FREEDOM IN A DYSTOPIAN SAN FRANCISCO.

ALL RIGHT, SLUTS!! CLASS IS NOW IN SESSION.

WELCOME TO YOUR THIRD DAY OF DIRTY MIND SEX WORKER ORIENTATION.

DOMINA CASIE
- BONDAGE AFICIONADO
- DAPPER PUNK

MX. SYLVIA
- TECH GENIUS
- MISTRESS OF DISGUISE

THOSE CONSERVATIVE GOVERNMENT ASSHOLES IN THE PARTY KEEP GAINING MORE POWER, SURVEILLING AND POLICING EVERYONE'S SEXUAL FREEDOM.

IF WE'RE GONNA SURVIVE WE NEED UNITY, AND THAT STARTS IN *THIS* ROOM, WITH OUR SPECIAL BRAND OF PERVERTED EDUCATION.

WE'VE BEEN OVER DISCIPLINE, PUNISHMENT, SADOMASOCHISM AND SOME BASIC FETISHES.

TODAY WE'RE GONNA TRAIN YOU TO TALK DIRTY! HOW TO COMMUNICATE ABOUT DESIRES! THE PARTY WANTS TO DENY US OUR ABILITY TO EXPRESS OURSELVES! OBSCENITY HAS NEVER BEEN MORE IMPORTANT!

ANY QUESTIONS BEFORE WE START?

I'M ALWAYS AFRAID I'M GONNA SOUND SILLY WHEN I TALK DIRTY!

YEAH, I FREEZE UP AND CAN'T THINK OF ANYTHING TO SAY.

DON'T WORRY. WE'LL MAKE CUNNING LINGUISTS OUT OF EVERY LAST ONE OF YOU.

CAN WE FOCUS? AND TRY NOT TO DISTRACT THE STUDENTS, SYLVIA?

WHAAAAAAT? WE'RE ALL ADULTS HERE!

I DESIGNED THIS LITTLE HOLOGRAM SHOW FOR OUR PRESENTATION.

IT'LL RESPOND TO YOU AS YOU LEARN.

CLICK!

OOOOOOHHOOH

LET'S START WITH ANATOMY WORDS. WHAT ARE SOME OF YOUR FAVORITES?

ARMS

NIPPLES

LEGS

MOUTH

TITS

ASS

WAIST

HIPS

ONCE YOU KNOW WHAT WORDS YOU LIKE TO DESCRIBE YOUR OWN BODY, YOU CAN REFER TO YOURSELF THAT WAY. WHEN I SAY "STROKE MY COCK-

-JUST LIKE THAT," IT SIGNALS TO MY PARTNER THAT THESE WORDS TURN ME ON AND I FEEL AFFIRMED BY THEM.

IF SOMEONE SAYS, "I WANT YOU IN MY HOLE RIGHT THE FUCK NOW..."

THEN YOU CAN RESPOND WITH SOMETHING LIKE "YOUR HOLE LOOKS SO HUNGRY!"

SEX IS ALL ABOUT ACTION. SO LET'S TAKE A STROLL THROUGH THE DIRTY MIND TO EXPLORE SOME OF OUR FAVORITE VERBS!

I REALLY LOVE THE WAY YOU SLOBBER ALL OVER MY TITS.

FUCK ME!

HARD!

UH!

YEAH, YOU LIKE IT WHEN I SPANK YOU, DON'T YOU, YOU LITTLE SLUT?

YOU CAN USE THESE WORDS AS COMMANDS, LIKE "POUND ME RIGHT THIS SECOND, DADDY" OR "LICK BETWEEN MY TOES!"

OR AS EXPRESSIONS OF DESIRE, LIKE "I CAN'T WAIT TO FLIP YOU OVER AND EAT YOUR ASS TILL YOU GUSH ALL OVER THE PLACE."

OR AS INSTRUCTIONS -- "I WANT YOU TO PUSH ALL OF THAT SPUNK OUT OF YOUR CUNT INTO MY MOUTH."

I WANT YOU TO COME OVER AND SIT YOUR WET, HOT, DRIPPING PUSSY ON MY FACE!

NEXT UP: DESCRIPTIVE LANGUAGE. ACCENTUATE THOSE NOUNS WITH ADJECTIVES LIKE PUFFY NIPPLES OR HAIRY ARMPITS OR SWEATY COLLARBONE.

RAMP IT UP WITH ADVERBS: CHOKE ME HARDER; I'M GONNA TICKLE YOU LIGHTLY; THAT MAKES ME OPEN EVEN WIDER!

Sweet

Wet

Juicy

Gorgeous

ADJECTIVES MAKE FOR GREAT COMPLIMENTS, AND WHAT'S A BIGGER TURN-ON THAN FLATTERY? THE POINT OF DIRTY TALK IS TO TURN OURSELVES ON, TO MAKE OTHERS FEEL GOOD. BEING SEEN, TOUCHED, WORSHIPPED OR APPRECIATED DOES WONDERS FOR THAT!

STRIPPERS ARE REALLY GOOD AT COMPLIMENTS!

i can't believe how big and strong you are.

GOD! YOUR HAIR SMELLS SOOOOO DELICIOUS, I JUST WANNA BURY MY FACE IN IT!

YOUR THIGHS LOOK UNBELIEVABLE.

LET'S GET SOME VOLUNTEERS TO THE FRONT OF THE CLASS TO PRACTICE SOME DIRTY TALK!

OH! HI ♡

NOW, TELL US SOMETHING YOU'RE ANTICIPATING.

I CAN'T WAIT TO FEEL YOUR JIZZ SHOOT DOWN THE BACK OF MY THROAT.

WHO WANTS TO TRY OUT SUPERLATIVES OR HYPERBOLE?

OH MY FUCKING GOD! NO ONE HAS EVER MADE ME COME THIS MANY TIMES!

EXCELLENT! NOW HOW ABOUT SEDUCTION?

I HOPE YOU'RE WELL RESTED 'CAUSE YOU'RE NOT GETTING ANY SLEEP TONIGHT, YOU FUCKING SLUT!!

VERY IMPRESSIVE! AND A FEW MINUTES AGO YOU COULDN'T THINK OF ANYTHING TO SAY!

WHO'S A GOOD PUP?

ANOTHER TOOL IN YOUR DIRTY TALK HANDBAGS: KINKY LANGUAGE!

MERCY, SIR!

MYESH MISHTRESH.

SOME OF THOSE WORDS MIGHT BE PART OF YOUR SEXUAL IDENTITY.

THEY MIGHT INDICATE A POWER DYNAMIC.

H-HOLY SHIT...

THAT FEELS SOOOOO GOOD --

GOOD GIRL...

Daddy

LOTS OF PEOPLE ARE TURNED ON BY RECLAIMING OPPRESSIVE LANGUAGE.

REMEMBER, IT'S NOT DEGRADING WHEN SOMEONE ASKS FOR IT! IT'S UP TO EACH OF US TO DECIDE WHAT'S A TURN-ON AND WHAT'S OFF-LIMITS.

PERV

BITCH

SLUT

AND YES, USING ROMANTIC AND INTIMATE LANGUAGE LIKE PET NAMES CAN BE A TURN-ON.

SMOOCH

MI AMOR ♥

BABY GIRL~

SWEETIE

HONEY-BUN ♥

TEDDY BEAR ♥

HOW DO I KNOW THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A TURN-ON AND A TURNOFF?

YEAH, HOW CAN YOU TELL A HOT TABOO FROM A TRIGGER?

I CAN'T ALWAYS TELL IF I'M BEING SEDUCTIVE OR BEING A CREEP!

USE YOUR WORDS, DAMN IT!

EROTIC LANGUAGE IS LIKE A VIBRATOR FOR YOUR IMAGINATION!

THAT'LL DO, I GUESS...

BUT DIRTY TALK IS ALSO ABOUT USING VERBAL COMMUNICATION TO BETTER UNDERSTAND YOURSELF AND YOUR PARTNERS.

TAKE THE TIME TO EXPLORE WHAT YOU LIKE AND DON'T LIKE. ASK YOUR PARTNER TO SHARE THEIR DESIRES AND BOUNDARIES.

BE A GOOD AND CARING LISTENER!

STAY *FLEXIBLE* AND OPEN-MINDED FOR THINGS TO CHANGE.

AND LEARN TO BE OKAY WITH NOT GETTING WHAT YOU WANT.

NOW THAT YOU'RE ARMED WITH THESE SEXY TALKIN' SKILLS...

...YOU CAN TAKE THE AFTERNOON FOR SOME INDEPENDENT STUDY.

TEACHER'S PET

PUSSY BITCH CHOKE ME

MAKES YA PROUD, DOESN'T IT? THE NEXT GENERATION OF DIRTY MINDS.

VULGARITY HAS NEVER SOUNDED BETTER.

FOLLOW THE ADVENTURES OF THE DIRTY MIND AS THEY FIGHT SEXUAL REPRESSION USING THE POWER OF INDECENCY IN SFSX, THE ONGOING SCI-FI SERIES IN COMIC STORES NOW.

STORY: TINA HORN
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ART: ALEJANDRA GUTIÉRREZ
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SARAH

E. Evans

This small town Texas fitness model Sarah E. Evans reveals a little bit of herself to us and leaves us wanting more.

ARTWORK BY
KLAWE RZECZY

WORDS MATTER

An inveterate civil-rights activist and former ACLU president argues that even with the evolving dangers of social media, unrestrained free speech remains the key to democracy

BY **NADINE STROSSEN**

My father was a Holocaust survivor who barely survived slave labor in the Buchenwald concentration camp. My maternal grandfather was an immigrant to the United States who was subjected to degrading punishment because he was a conscientious objector during World War I. And so I've always possessed a strong sense of injustice, and I've welcomed every opportunity to speak out against it.

As a teen I traveled to different high schools in my area, debating against the Vietnam war before school-wide assemblies. Those experiences played a crucial formative role by introducing me to the law. I realized that legal tools could reduce the discriminatory human rights violations that had always upset me. It sounds corny to say that many of us went to law school at that time to change the world, but it's true — and despite the ongoing challenges, the overall human rights situation in the U.S. and worldwide is vastly better now than it was when I graduated from law school. I say this not so we crusaders can rest on our laurels but for the opposite reason: to remind us that we can confidently look forward to further human rights gains if we persist in our efforts. But those gains will not be possible if our First Amendment rights are violated.

Freedom of speech means we should be free to choose what to say and listen to — as well as what we're not going to say or listen to. I should be free from constraints at the hands of any individual or entity powerful enough to exert those constraints, whether it's the government, a social media behemoth, a university official or a mob.

The American Civil Liberties Union continues to defend freedom of speech even for those who use that freedom to challenge our deeply held values with regard to civil liberties. Probably our most infamous case was defending the right of neo-Nazis to demonstrate in Skokie, Illinois — which had a large Jewish population, including many Holocaust survivors — in 1977. We did the same thing in Charlottesville, Virginia four decades later, defending free speech for white supremacist demonstrators. These positions have been strongly criticized, even by many ACLU members. But we're also continually attacked from other quarters for our defense of the free speech rights of crusaders for racial justice. For example, we're currently defending Black Lives Matter activist DeRay Mckesson against allegations that his speech instigated anti-police violence. I take these diverse criticisms as a rough indicator that we're getting it right.

Many people are understandably concerned about disinformation, which of course can undermine the integrity of elections and jeopardize our form of government. But before turning to censorship in the hope of reducing these threats, we must consider the countervailing harm that such censorship would cause. Empowering the government or social media giants to decide what's true and what's false is far more dangerous: It's easy to see the potential damage to speech, but censorship inevitably vests enforcers with discretion to choose which words and speakers to punish. This power is always wielded disproportionately against government critics, dissidents and advocates of reform.

Donald Trump certainly didn't forfeit his free speech rights when he became president. He can voice his opinions no matter how hateful or hated many of us may find them, but he shouldn't cross the line between conveying his personal opinion and threatening to exercise his official power to punish certain ideas or speakers. I believe he has crossed that line in some situations, such as withdrawing White House press passes from reporters and threatening to withdraw broadcast licenses from a TV network for what he viewed as unfair coverage. When he attacks the media as "the enemy of the people," that has a chilling effect on freedom of the press. (I don't mean to compare Trump to Hitler in any other sense, but it is noteworthy that Hitler sowed distrust among the German populace by using the term *Lügenpresse* — or "lying press.") It's no coincidence that the press is often called the fourth branch of government: It's meant to provide a check and balance against overreaching government officials. Trump should not be punished for this rhetoric, but the rest of us have to push back hard and point out its insidious, anti-democratic dangers.

Every administration in my adult lifetime has taken some actions that have violated free speech and the press. The Obama administration, for example, pursued a record number of prosecutions against whistleblowers under the Espionage Act, which goes back to the red scare of the World War I era. What's different about Trump is that he openly brags about his attacks on the press. Richard Nixon pulled many of the same levers, but he did it on the sly. We found out about it only afterward, right? Trump seems proud of his attacks on critics.

Regardless of who is in the White House, every one of us has an opportunity and a responsibility to understand the essential nature of freedom of speech — to appreciate the distinction between supporting what somebody says and supporting their right to say it. You have to train yourself to look beyond the particular message to the underlying principle, and to be alert to the slippery slope of censorship.

Speech is not an unalloyed good. We don't defend it because it can't do harm; we defend it because the harm of censorship is greater than the harm of speech — and because the harm of speech can be prevented, or at least reduced, through more speech in the form of education and discussion, both of which are more effective than censorship.

Freedom of speech is also a means of exploration, of engagement with other individuals and the world at large. If we can't express ourselves, that stunts our ability to realize our highest individual potential. The Constitution starts with the words We the People. *We the people* hold the sovereign power in this country. As the Supreme Court declared back in 1964, "speech concerning public affairs is more than self-expression; it is the essence of self-government."

Without this freedom, no other rights can be pursued. ■

senator gardner, *radical* centrist

WELCOME TO
GREENER
COLORADO

There's a 6,000-square-foot cannabis dispensary — Euflora, the only pot shop along downtown Denver's pedestrian mall — I've been wanting to check out. But first I've got a holiday party to crash. Luckily the dispensary is a mere three-minute walk from the luxurious Brown Palace Hotel and Spa, which has hosted gold speculators, gunslinging gamblers and other colorful patrons since it opened in 1892. On this brisk evening, Colorado's junior U.S. senator has taken over one of its ballrooms.

Cory Gardner is a lawyer but not a three-piece-suit-wearing jackass. After working for his family's agricultural company in eastern Colorado and getting a law degree, he became a spokesperson for the National Corn Growers Association. Republicans tapped him in 2005 to fill a vacant seat in the Colorado House of Representatives. In 2011 he was wooed eastward for a four-year stint in the U.S. House before finally capturing a Senate seat three years later. This November he's running for reelection, likely against former Democratic governor John Hickenlooper, whom an Emerson College survey gives a more than 10-point advantage.

Colorado's Republican statesman and unexpected cannabis-industry darling is on the run—from Trump's legacy and, often, his own

BY **MATT LASLO**

But Donald Trump's advent has rendered almost all political scales obsolete. Six years ago Gardner captured one of the nation's last purple Senate seats by running as a "freethinker." Tides churned. Almost accidentally he now finds himself a Trumplican. On paper at least he has broken with the president on cannabis, immigration and foreign affairs, but his independent flashes are drowned out by loyalty to a party unrecognizable to his forebears. That makes Gardner's race feel more internal than external — almost as though he's running against his former self and all the principles he once professed to cherish.

Unlike many of his peers, Gardner, now 45, isn't a millionaire, though he occasionally lives like one. Tonight is one of those nights when it's perfectly legal, if unseemly, for him to use his Project West PAC to cover the tab for seemingly endless platters of beef Wellington, coconut shrimp and several offerings whose names I can't readily pronounce.

Besides a couple rocking matching bikers for trump black leather vests, the room hums mostly with well-dressed donors, conservative activists and senior staffers. Down the hall, Gardner emerges from an elevator with his wife, Jaime, and their three children. He heartily greets me as if this weren't the third time I've seen him this December day.

He flashes his family a smile before encouraging them warmly, if absentmindedly, to head in without him. His wife responds with an honest frown. It appears she isn't happy being abandoned among this lot of power-hungry scavengers.

"Probably like three or four minutes," Gardner's communications director, Annalyse Keller, says of my last moments with the senator. This makes me both angry and nervous, but I'm not on the ballot.

Numerous local journalists have warned me that the senator avoids the press, and when you google "Cory Gardner reporters" the top hits include "dodges," "won't say" and "declines." His staff notoriously announces events with just hours' notice, claiming accessibility while screwing understaffed newsrooms left scrambling to cover him. After the senator went nearly 500 days without a town hall, fed-up activists sent a "Cardboard Cory" cutout on a statewide bus tour to meet with constituents. Democrats paint Gardner as a shorter Donald Trump. There's lots to discuss, but he's not eager to talk.

I was in two of Gardner's private meetings earlier, including one at a Denver passport office, which State Department employees wouldn't let me record. Later, my allotted 10-minute interview stretched to 15 after I hopped into Gardner's elevator. We talked about foreign policy because that was his focus. His staff even brought me to a gathering of the nation's top defense contractors and climate- denying Armed Services Committee chair Senator Jim Inhofe, who quietly informed these pillars of the military- industrial complex that their world is dependent on Gardner's election this fall. (*Wink wink*, cut the man a check already, was what I heard.)

Keller scooped me in the morning so I could ride with the senator between events, as I'd requested. That never happened, but for lunch, Keller and Jerrod Dobkin, communications director for Gardner's reelection campaign, spun me for about an hour.

Later it hits me: All they scheduled over my four days here were two private events and a brief interview. But playboy

flew me west to cover an issue that never came up at their handpicked meetings, which is why I'm now basically crashing a party his team never told me about.

"We haven't really talked about cannabis laws yet," I tell him in the ballroom.

"Yeah, yeah," Gardner, now donning a tie for the first time today, says, nodding.

The senator is prepared: Cannabis is his bipartisan thing. He's supposedly one of Washington's last pragmatists — or moderates, though he doesn't dare utter that M word in the Trump era. Gardner helped ease wholesale GOP opposition to marijuana after drafting the Strengthening the Tenth Amendment Through Entrusting States — or STATES — Act with Senator Elizabeth Warren in 2018. Like other proposals floating around the Hill, the legislation seeks to decriminalize cannabis federally, but it's unique in that it focuses on empowering states so they can decide their own marijuana policies once the fear of federal interference is removed. Some Democrats now distance themselves from it; they're demanding reparations, of sorts, for minority communities left ravaged by the war on drugs. To Gardner, his bill remains the only answer.

Although legalization is relatively new in Colorado, cannabis is no longer a novelty: Marijuana delivery is more sophisticated than pizza apps here. The roadblock for this burgeoning industry is federal prohibition. It's the reason heavily armed security is required to protect these all-cash operations that federally insured banks are required to shun.

Gardner's cannabis awakening came only after 55.32 percent of voters rejected his former prohibitionist stance and passed Colorado's revolutionary recreational cannabis law in 2012.

"Where are you on that personally now?" I ask.

"It's the STATES Act," Gardner replies.

"But what do you think about marijuana personally?" I press.

"The state should decide," Gardner says.

"Have you ever used it?" I ask, clawing for honesty.

"No, no," Gardner says, laughing. "You can quote that. I always thought people might use that against me."

He then dismisses my offer to try it with me.

• • •

For a decade I've witnessed Cory Gardner's evolution. His once-dark hair is now silver. As a House freshman, he earned an approval score of 82 percent from the Tea Party's FreedomWorks group. Then, as a senator in 2018, he backslid to 61 percent. Back in the House he was more conservative than independent, even supporting a fetal-personhood act — a position he conveniently disavowed in his Senate run.

After riding 2010's Tea Party wave to Washington, in 2014 Gardner ran for the Senate as a freethinker. In 2016, after the pussy-grabbing video surfaced, he "rescinded" his Trump endorsement, only to endorse him again at the start of 2019. Just as this is a new Republican Party, this is a new Cory Gardner.

Not many polls are out yet. Those that are reveal the thin reddish-purple line on which Gardner is tiptoeing. Keating Research found that an astonishing 90 percent of Colorado Republicans approve of Trump, while only 63 percent view Gardner favorably. Even as Democrats paint Gardner as a radical conservative, many Republicans consider him a sellout for deviating from Trump even once. With Gardner, it's always complicated.

Gardner is proud of Trump's judges—"I'm going to point to all the judges," he gushes over his 2020 campaign strategy including two now on the Supreme Court. In 2018 he chaired the National Republican Senatorial Committee and helped defeat centrist Democrats Claire McCaskill of Missouri and Joe Donnelly of Indiana. On climate change, he says humans are the culprits, but he has helped unwind environmental regulations. He worked with Democrats on immigration, then supported Trump's wall. The president is an isolationist, while Gardner wants engagement — though "Hillary Clinton opposed TPP," he says, defending Trump.

His political calculations, or lack thereof, have turned heads. Voters are wondering which Cory Gardner is on their ballots: Trump lapdog or centrist? He's played both parts well.

"Your brand is different than Trump," I tell Gardner.

"It is. That's right. Yeah," Gardner replies. "We ran in 2014 as a different kind of Republican, and that's exactly what we continue to be: optimistic, forward-looking, reaching out, finding solutions."

Gardner has had his moments. After then attorney general Jeff Sessions rescinded the Obama-era Department of Justice memo shielding most locally legal cannabis companies from federal enforcement, Gardner temporarily held up Justice Department nominees. Eventually he and Warren crafted the STATES Act, which garnered positive headlines for Gardner after Trump told reporters, as Marine One spewed dirt about the White House lawn, "I probably will end up supporting that, yes."

I hear "probably" because Trump is a pathological liar, at least according to fact-checkers. Gardner hears only "yes." Whether it's naivete or blind faith, he trusts Trump — even after he reversed himself on DREAMers, gun control, foreign policy and more.

"He said it to me on the phone, gosh, almost a year ago," Gardner says. "He said it to me in person many times since then."

Trump told reporters "probably" in June 2018. Some two years later, not even a tweet, even though federal prohibition has now been rejected by 33 states, the District of Columbia, four territories and some Native American tribes. As a good Republican, Gardner blames Obama: "If this was so important to them, they would have done something."

Even as he embraces such tired conservative talking points, there's an obvious disconnect between Gardner and today's GOP. That's why I'm chasing this flustered senator who remains proud of his conservative record but runs from reporters. It appears Gardner doesn't want to discuss Trump lest he mess up and say what 2016 Gardner was thinking when he rescinded his endorsement of the self-proclaimed groper in chief. In 2014 and 2016 he stood out — but after facing conservative fire, 2020 Gardner is tied to Trump. Or so his opponents think.

• • •

By some metrics, Gardner's style is effective. The Lugar Center named him the fifth-most-bipartisan senator in the 115th Congress. Trump relocated the Bureau of Land Management to Colorado and, at least temporarily, housed U.S. Space Command here. Democrats say those are prepackaged gifts from the administration meant to divert attention from Gardner's record since Trump took office.

"I understand why they're frustrated," Gardner says. "They wanted me to be the old fuddy-dud Republican, and unfortunately, what they've seen is somebody who's effective at getting things done. I get why they're angry."

Democrats can't fathom why Gardner isn't angry. While the senator is rhetorically tough as hell on Russia and North Korea, Trump praises their oppressive leaders. If he's tried, Gardner

hasn't moved Republicans on climate change or immigration. Trump has also delivered nothing on cannabis — private assurances don't count. (Neither the White House nor members of Trump's campaign responded to numerous offers for the president to weigh in.) Of course, Democrats bitch about any Republican who has assisted Trump, especially those, like Gardner, who voted to kill Obamacare while supporting massive tax cuts. But his story is more complex.

"Compassionate conservatism" was a recent GOP mantra, but that makeover began to fade even before Trump started wielding sledgehammer-style conservatism. That's why, at least compared with Trump's rebranded GOP, Gardner looked angelic for co-sponsoring the Dream Act.

"He stuck his neck out, and I appreciated it," Dick Durbin, the number two Senate Democrat, tells playboy. "It wasn't an easy call in the age of Donald Trump. In my world, it stands tall."

• • •

Gardner also receives praise from the cannabis industry, which becomes evident minutes into a private tour of an expansive cannabis grow in Aurora, Colorado.

As I enter the dispensary at this Terrapin Care Station (one of six), the Cheech and Chong tropes dissipate. Its warm wooden floors lend a ski-lodge ambience, and the polished display cases alert visitors that cannabis is taken seriously here. Exotic offerings abound, including Live Nectar, a crystal-like amber substance that burns more smoothly than the hundreds of joints nearby, the latter expertly labeled so users know whether they're sparking, say, a PBR or a Jameson. There is also a variety of gummies, jellies, tinctures and even THC bath salts that promise a body buzz.

Past the dispensary, Terrapin founder and CEO Chris Woods — wearing jeans, a white button-down shirt and a purple plaid sports coat—plays tour guide. As I head through the secure doors, my nostrils dance from the sweet, pugnacious aroma emanating from roughly 3,000 plants. The 35,000-square-foot facility is fitted with 216 natural lights that encourage the plants to pump out roughly 350 to 400 pounds of sticky buds monthly.

Each plant has a unique RFID tag that eventually matches the label on the products that consumers purchase, enabling health officials to trace any contaminants. One room boasts an elaborate lab where employees in blue coats and rubber gloves — along with hair and beard nets — show off vials of liquid THC and petri dishes brimming with pure THC crystals that are, except for their enticing golden glow, oddly reminiscent of crack rocks.

Around 3,000 similar, if mostly less elaborate, licensed marijuana businesses dot the state. The industry has witnessed more than $7 billion in sales over six years, reaping $1 billion in state revenue. According to my host, Cory Gardner deserves credit.

"It could very well have been the case that this industry would not exist how it is today if it weren't for Cory," Woods says.

Woods doesn't like politicians, but Gardner won his respect for battling Sessions. And Peter Marcus, Terrapin's communications director, says Gardner's mark is industry-wide.

"As a Republican standing up, pounding the dais, saying, 'I will not let these nominations go through until you respect states' rights'—those are the major talking points for the industry that you wouldn't necessarily have gotten had it been a Democrat who you expected to obviously stand up and be good on marijuana," Marcus says.

In a past life as a reporter, Marcus covered Gardner. He says numerous entities endorsed cannabis proposals after Gardner's outspoken advocacy provided cover. To him, Gardner is "a guy who's been on the wrong side of liberal issues for his entire time as a politician, going back to the statehouse. That was what was significant about it: the headlines generated from this specific man taking this to the people like that."

But even with praise coming from some surprising voices, Gardner is still saddled with a Trump-size problem.

• • •

On a Tuesday morning in December, three days before the Brown Palace event, more than a dozen reporters — cameras, note pads and recorders in tow — huddled outside the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Inside, senators examined "The Future of U.S. Policy Towards Russia." In the past it would have been a staid, bipartisan event, but in Trump's Washington, formerly innocuous hearings generate headlines. This was evident when Mitt Romney of Utah, the 2012 GOP presidential nominee who has remained critical of Trump, made news for breaking with the president by saying—gasp!—he agreed with the nation's 17 intelligence agencies and blamed Russia, not Ukraine, for election meddling.

In between Romney and Ron Johnson, Republican of Wisconsin, sat Gardner. During the hearing he joked with both men, who represent opposite wings of today's GOP. Addressing the issue at hand, he sounded more like a classic GOP hawk than this new breed of Trump-before-all-else pols. So instead of pivoting to the middle, as Romney has, or putting his head in Trump's crotch, where Johnson's head seems to rest these days, Gardner went old school — think Iron Curtain Reagan Republican — and accused Russia of being a state sponsor of terrorism.

That's where Gardner stands out: He's constantly trying to appease moderates without alienating Trump's base. But at least for now, Trumpism has killed conservatism. That may explain why Gardner hurried into the hall after asking questions that felt out of place in Trump's Washington.

"It's always good to continue the pressure," a quick-paced Gardner told me through a nervous smile. A moment later he asked, "I went the wrong way, didn't I?"

"No," a staffer intoned.

True to form, at least these days, Gardner was hurried, running when he didn't have to. He knows Trump has transformed the GOP in his own image, shrinking its tent to such a degree that some prominent traditional conservatives no longer feel at home there. I ask him, as he has labored to carve out his own perch in this new GOP, if he has ever felt out of place.

"No, not at all," Gardner says. "I'm a Republican. I believe in getting government out of the way."

Gardner has battle scars from crawling in Trump's trenches, along with some nicks from crossing him. As the senator prepares for what may be the fight of his career, the very commander for whom he has sacrificed so much — his brand, his identity and, some say, his integrity — is the one he must fear the most. But it's impossible to distance yourself from someone like Trump, especially after being his mostly reliable rubber stamp. That's why, whether Gardner likes it or not, Colorado voters will be presented one choice in November: Vote for or against Trump. In Gardner's case, just as in the case of leaders in other battleground states, no matter how fast or how far he runs, he can't erase four years of Trump from voters' minds.

Even if, at times, it's what he desperately longs to do. ■

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